



THE DETECTION CLUB AND THE MID-CENTURY FIGHT OVER “FAIR PLAY” IN CRIME FICTION

While the club clung to pure detection as a prerequisite for admission, members' own tastes were far more divided.

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“Fair is Foul, Foul is Fair”—Macbeth

Note:

This essay in its original form appeared a decade ago this month in a pamphlet with a small print run published by *CADS: Crime and Detective Stories*. With minor modifications it appears now, on its tenth anniversary, before a much larger audience at *Crimereads*. Today's readers may notice how “Corinne” anticipated other studies from the past decade of the 2010s, which collectively have greatly altered views of vintage crime fiction. —CE

PART I: THE MEMBERS OF THE CLUB

Great Britain's Detection Club, officially formed in London in 1930 by twenty-eight mystery writers in order to confab and foster the writing of detective fiction, has often been portrayed as a temple of aesthetic orthodoxy, symbolizing the obstinate determination of between-the-wars British mystery writers to enshrine eternally the detective novel as a purely mechanical puzzle. "There is no limit to folly," bemusedly observed Julian Symons, an early leading apostle of the modern crime novel, in his iconoclastic mystery genre survey *Bloody Murder* (first published nearly half-a-century ago in 1972), "but it seems surprising that the intelligent men and women who devised the rules [for writing detective stories during its so-called "Golden Age"] did not see that they were limiting the scope and interest of their work." To be sure, the sacred oath required of prospective members of the Detection Club demanded, among other things, their adherence to that Golden Age holy of holies, the principle of "fair play" (i.e., presentation of clues in a manner which allows the reader a chance of solving the mystery). Yet this oft-cited fair play principle does not tell the whole story of how Detection Club members saw their craft during that remarkable era known as the Golden Age of detective fiction.

In truth, over the course of the 1930s many Detection Club members, both founders and later initiates, moved away in their own work from the pure puzzle form, putting comparatively greater emphasis on what arch-traditionalist American detective novelist S.S. Van Dine in his "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories" had dismissed in the 1920s as "literary dallying" and "atmospheric preoccupations." This "back-to-literature" movement notwithstanding, however, Detection Club members continued to pay formal obeisance to the Club oath's demand for fair play in the presentation of clues. Even when faced with the obvious diminution in Detection Club ranks at the end of World War Two and the fact that fewer upper-tier mystery writers were writing tales of pure detection, surviving Club members maintained some level of commitment to the fair play principle when evaluating prospective initiates.

Surviving correspondence among the membership from the late 1940s and early 1950s reveals that while the Detection Club accepted as members authors whose devotion to true detection in their genre writing seemed something less than firm (including Julian Symons), the Club also apparently turned down for membership other individuals on fair play grounds. Even more progressive Detection Club members like Dorothy L. Sayers, who in the 1930s had urged for movement within the genre away from a dominant emphasis on

detection, continued to apply the fair play rule when examining prospective candidates for membership in the post-WW2 period, although this rule did not absolutely determine membership decisions. In short, “fair play” still lived within the hallowed quarters of the Detection Club, even in Britain’s postwar austerity era, a period when fewer new crime writers evinced interest in the intricacies of fair play. Yet many Club members, mindful of the need to enlist quality authors in their organization and cognizant of the altered aesthetics of the mystery genre in the time in which they were living (as well as being something rather more complex than their reactionary puzzle dogmatist caricatures), proved flexible in their application of the fair play principle.

The Detection Club’s original 1930 membership of twenty-eight men and women included most of the prominent writers of British detective fiction at the time. Among the members were G. K. Chesterton, H. C. Bailey, E. C. Bentley, Anthony Berkeley, Agatha Christie, G. D. H. and Margaret Cole, J. J. Connington, Freeman Wills Crofts, R. Austin Freeman, Milward Kennedy, Ronald A. Knox, A. E. W. Mason, A. A. Milne, Arthur Morrison, Baroness Orczy, John Rhode, Dorothy L. Sayers, Henry Wade and Victor L. Whitechurch. Of this group only a small number were active members, i.e., people seriously involved in organizational matters. Some founding members, such as J. J. Connington, likely never attended another Detection Club event after their initiations.

Although he became honorary president of the Club after G. K. Chesterton’s death in 1936, E. C. Bentley was really a ceremonial figurehead. However, Freeman Wills Crofts, John Rhode, Milward Kennedy and, most importantly, Dorothy L. Sayers were significantly involved in the administration of Club activities, which included not only meetings and annual dinners but maintenance of a Club library and the carrying-out of jointly-produced publishing ventures, namely the BBC radio series “Behind the Screen” (1930) and “The Scoop” (1931), the novels *The Floating Admiral* (1931) and *Ask a Policeman* (1933), and three collections of short stories and essays, *The Anatomy of Murder* (1936), *Six Against the Yard* (1936) and *Detection Medley* (1939). Additionally, two other original members played some administrative role in the Club: Helen Simpson and Ianthe Jerrold, straight novelists who essayed a few well-regarded efforts in the detection genre. Simpson’s “Sir John” mysteries, co-written with Clemence Dane, also an original member of the Club, won high praise on both sides of the Atlantic; while Ianthe Jerrold’s essays in the genre, once forgotten, have been reprinted by Dean Street Press.

Sometimes it proved challenging herding together a sufficient number of members for Club events to run smoothly. In the spring of 1937, for example, it became difficult for officers to find enough members to carry out the performance of the complicated rituals of the initiation ceremony (probably on behalf of initiates E.C.R. Lorac and Christopher Bush). In March of that year Dorothy L. Sayers learned that Club member Milward Kennedy would be in the United States during the scheduled ceremony and that Anthony Berkeley—an

eccentric individual who during his long membership in the Club consistently proved a prickly creature to handle—was baulking about attending and participating as well. “How very tiresome of [him],” Sayers complained of Berkeley in a letter to Gladys Mitchell in 1933. “I knew he would break out of it. It is really difficult to think of anybody to take his place as we have used up pretty well all the men.” Elaborating this latter point, Sayers noted that A.A. Milne, the celebrated creator of Winnie-the-Pooh and author of a single detective tale, *The Red House Mystery* (1922), was “a shy bird,” while A.E.W. Mason, a mainstream novelist who had written a handful of highly-regarded detective novels, “very seldom” attended Club functions. Happily disaster was averted and the initiation dinner was carried off successfully, even though Hugh Walpole, who had “actually promised to come and do something,” according to Sayers, in the event did not show either. However other such challenges confronted the Club over the course of the decade, giving a series of headaches to Sayers and other members who took the management of the organization seriously.

The admission of eleven new members between 1933 and 1937 facilitated the administration of Club activities in the years before World War Two, since some of the newer people proved enthusiastic participants in the organization, helping out considerably at the various activities and even going so far as actually to pay their dues on time. With the exception of Normal Kendal, a barrister and an Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard, all the newer members were detective fiction authors: Anthony Gilbert (1933), E. R. Punshon (1933), Gladys Mitchell (1933), Margery Allingham (1934), John Dickson Carr (1936), Nicholas Blake (1937), Newton Gale (1937) (actually the pseudonym for two authors, British oil executive Maurice Guinness and American writer Muna Lee, a native of the state of Mississippi), E. C. R. Lorac (1937) and Christopher Bush (1937). Of this latter group of initiates, Gilbert, Punshon, Mitchell, Carr, Lorac and Bush appear to have been active members, particularly the first four.

During this decade members of the Detection Club, old and new, devoted and casual, were themselves testing the boundaries of the detective fiction genre, despite the Club’s reputation as a bastion of puzzle orthodoxy. To no small extent, the revolution against the primacy of the puzzle in British detective fiction came from within. Perhaps the most important Detection Club revolutionaries in this regard were, among the original members, Anthony Berkeley, Dorothy L. Sayers, Milward Kennedy and Henry Wade and, among later members, E.R. Punshon, Anthony Gilbert, Gladys Mitchell, Margery Allingham and Nicholas Blake. None of these authors ever totally abandoned the puzzle in their genre writing, but all of them in their works deemphasized fairly clued puzzlement relative to other, purely literary, elements.

The greatest Detection Club insurgent was the man often termed the Club’s founder, Anthony Berkeley. (It was Berkeley who in 1928 had suggested the initial informal dinner

meetings which led to the creation of the Club.) Even before the official formation of the Detection Club in 1930, Berkeley had with his famous novel *The Poisoned Chocolates Case* (1929) produced a tale subversive of the traditional genre; for in it successive solutions to a murder are advanced, only to be disproved one by one. Even though the supposed truth is eventually reached (by the most unlikely and unprepossessing of amateur detectives), the novel seems a calculated upending of Golden Age rationalism, carrying as it does the suggestion that “truth” is endlessly malleable, with one set of facts capable of producing numerous different, seemingly plausible, solutions.

The next year, Berkeley made his intention of subverting the detective fiction genre quite clear in the preface to his novel *The Second Shot* (1930), which appeared the very year the Detection Club was founded. In this preface-cum-manifesto, Berkeley pronounced that “the days of the old crime-puzzle, pure and simple, relying entirely upon the plot and without any added attraction of character, style, or even humor, are in the hands of the auditor.” The future of the genre lay not with tales chained to a logical puzzle but with novels having merely “a detective or crime interest” that would hold readers “less by mathematical than by psychological ties.” According to Berkeley, even the most ordinary, workaday murders in real life had enticing complications of “emotion, drama, psychology, and adventure” which the “conventional detective story,” constricted by rigid rules of fair play, was incapable of conveying.

The Second Shot hardly lives up to the grandiosity of Berkeley’s preface, its most subversive element being that Berkeley’s amateur detective Roger Sheringham reaches the wrong solution—a common enough occurrence with Sheringham. However, in 1931 Berkeley to much fanfare published, under his Francis Iles pseudonym, the famous “inverted” novel *Malice Aforethought*, in which the reader’s interest is not the mental one of attempting to solve a murder puzzle through logical deduction, but the emotional one of watching a person commit murder and then try to evade the grinding mills of justice. The next year Berkeley produced another Iles novel, *Before the Fact* (1932), in which the focus this time is on a potential “murderee”: a woman who fears her husband is going to murder her. Meanwhile, Roger Sheringham novels that Berkeley produced under his original pen name continued to diverge from traditional puzzles: *Top Storey Murder* (1931) (Sheringham gets the solution wrong again); *Jumping Jenny* (1933) (a tale of people conspiring to hide from the police what they think is the truth about a murder); and *Panic Party* (1934) (concerning murder and social breakdown on an island). Indeed, to the last-named novel, *Panic Party*, Berkeley appended a nose-tweaking dedication, in the form of a note to his fellow Detection Club member, Milward Kennedy, in which the puckish author boasted that his latest opus had broken every Detection Club “rule”:

MY DEAR MILWARD KENNEDY—

You once challenged me...to write a book in which the only interest should be the detection. I have no hesitation in refusing to do anything so tedious, and instead take the greatest pleasure in dedicating to you a book which is precisely the opposite, which breaks every rule of the austere Club to which we both belong, and which will probably earn my expulsion from its membership.

In truth, *Panic Party* did not constitute the categorical, down-the-line challenge to the Detection Club oath that Berkeley contended it did. (I fail to recall the presence in the tale of, among other proscribed things, death-rays, ghosts or “Chinamen”), although admittedly it certainly is a long way from a traditional fair play puzzle novel. Its publication did not have the slightest impact on Berkeley’s membership in good standing of the Club, however. Although in her review of the novel in the *Sunday Times* Dorothy L. Sayers cocked an eyebrow over Berkeley’s “slightly aggressive epistle dedicatory,” she faulted the novel, not for its flaunting of Detection Club rules, but for its unremittingly nasty characters. “There is a point at which ruthless realism becomes...a little too bad for belief,” Sayers lectured. She also tweaked Berkeley by wondering “whatever the *opposite* of detection may be.”

During these same years Dorothy L. Sayers herself was stretching the boundaries of the genre, both as a popular author and as an influential critic. In her mystery criticism Sayers began calling for detective novelists to place less emphasis on the puzzle and more on realistic character development and good writing, in order to bring the mystery novel back into the mainstream of English literature, as she believed it to have been back in Victorian sensation novelist Wilkie Collins’ day. In her review of the 1933 Berkeley novel *Jumping Jenny*, for example, Sayers figuratively welcomed the tale with open arms, acclaiming it as a step in the right artistic direction for the genre:

The greatest peril that besets the detective story is that of over-mechanisation. We have trodden the weary mile so often—the corpse, the constable, the interrogations, the false clues, the infallible sleuth, the criminal’s anxiety to cover his tracks, the slip, the true crime, the deductions, the dramatic expose, and the revolver shots in the final chapter. Mr. Anthony Berkeley deserves all gratitude for his energetic efforts to escape from the thralldom of formula.

In “Jumping Jenny” he has kicked over the traces with glee and gusto....He is an adept at showing how, from a single set of premises, the over-ingenious mind may construct endless theories, all plausible and all wrong, and it is immensely entertaining to watch the unhappy Sheringham light upon the truth, elaborately prove it to be impossible, and then proceed, with enormous self-importance, to demonstrate the convincing truth of what never happened at all.

If you are hard-boiled and disillusioned about detectives, you will find this tale very refreshing.

It reminds me in some ways of “The Poisoned Chocolates Case,” and I am not sure that it is not the cleverest thing Mr. Berkeley has done since that very clever book.

As a novelist Sayers practiced what she preached in her critical essays and reviews, for the mysteries she published between 1930 and 1935 (with the exception of the highly traditional 1931 Croftsian railway timetable novel, *The Five Red Herrings*) show movement toward her expressed ideal, the detective novel of manners. In 1930, Sayers produced two rather unorthodox detective novels: *Strong Poison*, in which her bright and flippant aristocratic amateur detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, falls shatteringly in love with beleaguered detective novelist Harriet Vane, on trial for the murder of her lover; and *The Documents in the Case*, which dispensed with her series detective entirely in telling, partially in epistolary form, the seedy tale of a suburban crime of passion. 1932’s *Have His Carcase* deepens the Peter and Harriet relationship, while *Murder Must Advertise* (1933) and *The Nine Tailors* (1934) immerse readers in well-conveyed settings, respectively a London advertising agency and a pious English village.

Although with these novels Sayers continued to produce tales with a detective interest, in her bestselling and penultimate completed Peter Wimsey novel, *Gaudy Night*, that detective interest (which does not even include a murder) is dwarfed by other questions, like the place of educated women in society and whether Harriet will consent to marry Lord Peter. Similarly, in Sayers’ final completed detective novel, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, accurately subtitled a love story with detective interruptions, the author seems more interested in depicting Peter’s prowess as a lover than as a detective. After the publication of *Busman’s Honeymoon*, Sayers, with minor exceptions, would abandon the writing of detective fiction (leaving an unfinished Lord Peter novel behind her)—though, as we will see, she did not stop reading the stuff.

Berkeley and Sayers are merely the most famous dissidents from the supposed pure puzzle orthodoxy of the Detection Club. The lesser-known though worthy writers Milward Kennedy and Henry Wade offer two other significant examples of Detection Club founding members who “went astray.” Milward Kennedy, who began his mystery writing career as a traditional puzzler, started turning out a different sort of tale in the mid-Thirties. (This was also the time when he succeeded Sayers as the mystery reviewer for the *Sunday Times*, where like Sayers he embraced the cause of making the detective novel both more literary and more realistic.) Kennedy’s *Poison in the Parish* (1935) is a semi-inverted village satire; his *Sic Transit Gloria* (1936), described by the author as “a few days in the life of a man whose friend dies,” is more a psychological study than a conventional puzzle; and his *I’ll be Judge, I’ll be Jury* (1937) is a dark inverted mystery, far closer to the spirit of the crime novel as envisioned by Julian Symons in his genre survey *Bloody Murder* than the pure puzzle of the Golden Age. After 1937, Kennedy would sporadically produce only four more mystery novels, works seemingly influenced more by the new style Eric Ambler espionage

tale and the tough American detective story associated with Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler than by classical British mystery. In *Sic Transit Gloria*, Kennedy, evidently having caught the preface bug from Anthony Berkeley, admitted to his publisher, Victor Gollancz (who also published Sayers), a deliberate missionary intent in his writing: "You and I are both lovers of the detective novel, and believe that it has a place in literature. For my part I believe too that if the detective novel becomes too stereotyped, if its 'rules' are applied too rigidly, the genre may be destroyed."

Although Henry Wade never attached a self-justificatory preface to any of his novels, he too began to move away from the traditional clue-puzzle and toward crime novels where the puzzle concerned human character, not railway timetables. Wade's first six novels, while certainly above the average in terms of writing, are relatively traditionalist in their emphasis on fair play puzzles. However, in 1932, the year Wade's sixth detective novel was published, the author wrote a letter to Dorothy L. Sayers which suggested that his thoughts as a writer had begun to wander in new directions. In his letter Wade warmly commended Sayers for her new mystery, *Have His Carcase*, the second installment in the Lord Peter-Harriet Vane saga. "The plot," Wade noted, "is excellent"; yet what pleased him most of all was "the actual writing and the characterization." Even minor characters, Wade found, were "one and all real and alive...not caricatures but human beings with souls."

The next year Wade, clearly directly inspired by Sayers' work, published a new crime tale, *Mist on the Saltings* (1933), in which he showed greater interest in delineating realistic character development, setting and police procedure than in devising an intricate clue puzzle. This shift in emphasis can be seen in much of his work over the rest of the decade. Only *Constable, Guard Thyself!* (1934) is a relatively traditional puzzle tale (though like Sayers' *Murder Must Advertise* it is something of a "workplace novel," where much space is given over to portraying the workings of a provincial police station). On the other hand, one novel, *Heir Presumptive* (1935), is an inverted tale in the style of Iles; two others, *Bury Him Darkly* (1936) and *Lonely Magdalen* (1940) are police procedurals; and another two, *The High Sheriff* (1937) and *Released for Death* (1938), are best seen, like *Mist on the Saltings*, as crime novels, explorations of character as impacted by crime. After World War Two, Wade would go on to produce seven more mystery novels between 1947 and 1957, but only a couple of them really adhere to the classical pattern.

Newer members of the Detection Club experimented as well in the 1930s. Novels by E. R. Punshon, Anthony Gilbert (pseudonym of a woman, Lucy Beatrice Malleson) and Gladys Mitchell showed less interest on the part of the authors in intricate clueing and more in writing style. The first of these three writers, E. R. Punshon, who has been reprinted by Dean Street Press, was one of Dorothy L. Sayers' favorite detective novelists over a period of some twenty-five years (from 1929, when he began publishing true detective novels, to 1956, the year of his death and the appearance of his last book). Sayers valued Punshon's

mysteries primarily for what she saw as their merit as crime literature rather than mere puzzles. In a 1933 *Sunday Times* review which clearly was much prized indeed by the blurb writers of E. R. Punshon's publisher Victor Gollancz, Sayers asked the question, "What is distinction?" and answered with the name of Punshon.

Sayers made it abundantly clear that what she referred to here was not plotting distinction but rather literary distinction. It was literary distinction, she declared, that was "missed by scores of competent mystery writers who can construct impeccable plots. The few who achieve it step—plot or no plot—unquestioned into the first rank." Conceding that "in the mere mechanics of puzzle-making, Punshon has his masters," Sayers nevertheless asserted that Punshon's tales more importantly had "that elusive something which makes them count as literature." The current Punshon mystery novel she was reviewing, *Information Received*, was in Sayers' view "a real book, not assembled by a journeyman, but written, as a book ought to be, by a man who is a writer first and foremost."

All Sayers' reviews of Punshon's detective fiction during her stay at the *Sunday Times* consistently emphasized the author's merit as a writer, not as a puzzler. Critiquing Punshon's *Death of a Beauty Queen* (1935), for example, Sayers, after chastising readers who preferred "their detective stories to be of the conventional kind" and enjoyed "the surface excitement without the inward disturbance that comes of being forced to take things seriously," went on to praise Punshon for eschewing elaborate detection in his novel and instead concentrating on "characters and their human relationships." By doing this, Sayers wrote approvingly, Punshon had produced "a fine and interesting novel, where the emotional discords are resolved in a strain of genuine pathos." Similarly, in a review of Punshon's *Mystery Villa* (1934), Sayers took time to note the resemblance of a character in the tale to Charles Dickens' famous fictional recluse, Mrs. Havisham from the novel *Great Expectations*. Indeed, the impressed Sayers went so far as to declare that of the two men Punshon had limned the more memorable delineation: "In 'Mystery Villa' we have the real thing—real solitude, real filth, real starvation of mind and body, with a real and ghastly necessity underlying the whole horrible superstructure of unreason." About the plot mechanics of the detective novel Sayers had little to say.

While E. R. Punshon maintained a consistent style as a detective novelist, emphasizing literary qualities over complexly plotted puzzles (though never dispensing with the puzzle structure), over the course of the 1930s Anthony Gilbert and Gladys Mitchell more gradually moved away from pure puzzlement. Anthony Gilbert came to focus more and more on her favored theme of the travails suffered by the weak and powerless (most often women or children), who are ultimately rescued by her raffish knight errant, defense attorney Arthur Crook, whom she introduced in 1936. Tales like *The Vanishing Corpse* (1941), *The Woman in Red* (1941), *Something Nasty in the Woodshed* (1942)

and *The Mouse Who Wouldn't Play Ball* (1943) arguably are more accurately classified as women in peril suspense thrillers than classical form clue-puzzles. A similar trajectory away from orthodox puzzling can be found in the work of the exuberant and idiosyncratic Gladys Mitchell. Indeed, many of Mitchell's later books are, from the standpoint of orthodox detection, something rather approaching ghastly bloody messes (see for example, *Here Comes a Chopper*, 1946); and it is difficult to see true sticklers about "fair play" giving the author a passing grade to them.

Although they wrote fairly clued detective novels in the Thirties and Forties, two other newer Club members, Margery Allingham and Nicholas Blake (the pseudonym of poet and later Cambridge lecturer and Oxford professor Cecil Day Lewis), expended much effort on writing and characterization and were two of the most highly regarded British writers within the genre by the end of the decade. Often reviewers praised Allingham and Blake, as Sayers had Punshon, for producing novels of crime that were genuine literature and not merely puzzles. Publishers similarly emphasized the literary qualities of detective novels by Allingham and Blake such as *The Fashion in Shrouds* (murder in the world of high fashion) and *The Beast Must Die* (father plots to avenge death of son). For example, Heinemann, Allingham's British publisher, boasted in its blurb for *The Fashion in Shrouds* (1938) that Allingham had produced "a convincingly realistic novel of modern times" and "a powerful modern novel which has something to say about the world in which we live." Bold claims like this one, which were becoming increasingly common in the world of mystery fiction, turned on their head the traditionalist dismissals of "literary dallying" made by the puzzle-minded Van Dine school.

In a talk given to members of the Asia Club in 1958, Cecil Day Lewis for his part expressed sentiments surely at odds with fair play puzzle orthodoxy:

I find [that] myself and indeed most of the detective writers I admire most now are clearly moving away towards something which...I call...the *whydunit*, the psychological thriller. I think that, when you've written a few of these simple puzzle novels, the kind of the novel, say, that Agatha Christie writes, where the characters are ciphers, and everything is in the plot and the mystification and the puzzle, if you're not Agatha Christie, you get *bored* doing it, and I'm *not* Agatha Christie and I have got *bored*. I've become much more interested in trying to discover...how people behave under abnormal stress, or in abnormal situations.

Blake speculated that "this contemporary change" of artistic attitude toward the mystery novel "probably started about 1930"—coincidentally the very year the Detection Club was founded.

Despite what might be seen as a slighting reference by Blake to England's then-reigning Queen of Crime, Agatha Christie—"if you're not Agatha Christie, you get bored doing [puzzles]"—Christie herself, as well as several other more orthodox Detection Club

members, had begun experimenting with the traditional detective novel form in the late 1930s. Indeed, Christie's most famous novel *And Then There Were None* (1939) is an unrelievedly grim, dark meditation on guilt and justice, with no detective to detect. Several other Christie works from the period, like *Sad Cypress* (1940), *Five Little Pigs* (1942) and *The Hollow* (1946), offer more streamlined puzzles along with more elaborate treatment of character and emotional situations. A similar development can be seen in several novels from the period by the celebrated "locked room" mystery writer John Dickson Carr, notably *The Burning Court* (1937), *The Emperor's Snuff-Box* (1942) and *She Died a Lady* (1943, credited to Carr's pseudonym Carter Dickson).

Even Freeman Wills Crofts, placed by Julian Symons at the head of what he derisively dubbed the "Humdrum" school of purportedly dull, puzzle-preoccupied writers, began producing less mechanically complex novels with greater focus on character and theme. As early as 1934, Crofts published one fully inverted novel, *The 12.30 from Croydon*, and one partially inverted tale, *Mystery on Southampton Water*, both of which portray the tempting of characters into criminal acts. His next two novels, *Crime at Guildford* (1935) and *The Loss of the 'Jane Vosper'* (1936), are quite involved affairs with the thinnest of cardboard characters; yet after the publication of these two tales, the deeply religious Crofts increasingly turned to a different style of novel, one which emphasized, in the manner of the Biblical parable, the moral dilemmas and mental traumas faced by characters confronted with or tempted by crime. See especially *Man Overboard!* (1936) (a woman who is tempted by riches learns that the promise of great wealth is not necessarily an unmixed blessing); *The End of Andrew Harrison* (1938) (a man witnesses the unhappiness wrought by greed in business); *Antidote to Venom* (1938) (another inverted tale, overtly urging religious redemption of criminals); *Fatal Venture* (1939) (a man comes to see the evil wrought by casino gambling); *James Tarrant, Adventurer* (1941) (a woman involved in the unethical patent medicine industry suffers emotional torments); and *The Affair at Little Wokeham* (1943) (another crime-does-not-pay inverted tale).

Similarly, Crofts' fellow "Humdrum," John Street, although he never abandoned the classical puzzle approach, produced some "John Rhode" and "Miles Burton" tales at this time which reveal a greater focus on characterization and setting: *The Bloody Tower* (1938) (graphically gloomy setting with a doomed rural family); *Death Pays a Dividend* (1939) (introduces a clever and charming love interest for the genteel young police detective Jimmy Waghorn, in the manner of Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh); *Death at the Helm* (1941) (strives to portray murder as having a real emotional cost); *Murder, M. D.* (1943) (memorable village setting and more interesting characters). Other works and additional authors could be listed, but these examples should suffice.

PART II: THE DETECTION CLUB GOES TO WAR

By the time World War Two erupted in 1939, the Detection Club had demonstrated that, contrary to popular myth, its membership was not a hopelessly reactionary, obstructionist priesthood determined to maintain the supremacy of the pure puzzle novel at the cost of characterization and literary style. Yet despite undeniable innovation in the works of Club members, all the writers admitted up through this time had produced at least some books with true fair-play detection. For example, any concerns over Nicholas Blake's admission to the Detection Club in 1937 arose out of his left-wing politics rather than his style of mystery writing—and even these were not really serious. In a letter to Gladys Mitchell, Dorothy L. Sayers confided that she was “quite agreeable to the election of Mr. Nicholas Blake to the Club,” even though the man behind the Blake pseudonym, Cecil Day Lewis, had “Communitistic leanings.” Declaring that she very much doubted the leftist poet would “split up the happy home,” she expressed no objection, either ideological or artistic, to Blake's admission. All three of the detective novels which he had published up to that point were relatively traditional affairs (though better written than the norm), Blake at this time having not yet tired of “simple puzzle novels.”

The onset of World War Two would soon change the Detection Club's membership goal from one of finding acceptable new members to that of enhancing the chances that existing members might continue to exist. At first there was some notion that the organization could be kept running during hostilities, and thus the hunt for likely initiates was continued. In April 1940, three more individuals, Georgette Heyer, Richard Hull and C. H. B. Kitchin, were considered as prospective Detection Club members, but Heyer evidently declined membership and Kitchin likely did so as well. Both Heyer and Kitchin were professional novelists who wrote detective fiction only as a sideline. The former was best known for her witty Regency romances, while Kitchin primarily wrote serious, fairly highbrow novels. Perhaps neither author took their detective fiction seriously enough to make a public affirmation of it. (Additionally, Heyer's detective novels were actually plotted by her husband, George Ronald Rougier.)

Richard Hull, who eventually became a Club member in 1946, when the organization began meeting again, presumably had been amenable to joining six years earlier, but there is no record I could find which reveals whether members took a vote on the matter in 1940. Ironically, Hull, who was best known for his celebrated inverted crime novel, *The Murder of My Aunt* (1934) was by far the least orthodox of this trio. Of the seven crime novels he had published up to April 1940, perhaps only a couple of them, *The Murderers of Monty* (1937) and *And Death Came Too* (1939), really approach being traditional puzzle novels, while several of his tales, like *The Murder of My Aunt*, *Keep It Quiet* (1935), and *The Ghost It Was* (1936) simply cannot be seen, from a strict fair play standpoint, as satisfactory. “It is not a detective story,” Sayers stated flatly in her *Sunday Times* review of *The Murder of My Aunt*, though she nevertheless went on to praise the book glowingly. Similarly, in his admiring review of *The Ghost It Was* Milward Kennedy conceded that “Mr. Hull does not pretend to give his readers a fair chance [to solve the mystery]....With him character is everything.”

Thus in even considering the possibility of admitting Richard Hull to the Detection Club, the organization either had begun to lower its fair play standard, or else it had deemed Hull's recent efforts a sufficient enough step in the fair play direction to warrant his consideration. (Interestingly, Hull's 1940 novel, *My Own Murderer*—his best book since *The Murder of My Aunt*—was a full return to his earlier inverted approach.) Possibly Hull was rejected for membership by the Club, yet it seems more likely, given his admission six

years later, after the war's end, that martial events interfered with any attempt to admit him. Hull, who was in his early forties at this time, was in service during 1939-40.

Whatever may have been the case with Richard Hull, one proposed member actually was turned down at this time, the only instance of such an occurrence of which I have found evidence from the pre-1945 period. In May 1940, Anthony Gilbert had urged upon Dorothy L. Sayers the nomination of Alice Campbell, an American-born migrant to England who had published up to this time ten mysteries, most of which were more on the order of suspense or thriller tales (such as her 1928 debut novel, *Juggernaut*, later filmed as a Boris Karloff horror film in 1936). "She would be an excellent member," pleaded Gilbert. "[She] would attend [meetings] and bring guests, is a professional writer who lives by her pen and is a charming woman and one of my best friends." For her part, Sayers agreed that Campbell "seems a charming person and should be a most excellent member."

Anticipating possible objection from Anthony Berkeley, who was proving something of a curmudgeon when it came to admitting any new members to the Club, Sayers strategized: "If Anthony Berkeley is opposed [to her] he is in Devon so we can do an end-run [around him]." Unfortunately, when it came to a vote of the membership committee, another obstacle loomed up in the form of Milward Kennedy (back from the United States), who apparently strongly objected to Campbell's election. Although the nominee was supported by Gilbert and the more orthodox puzzlers Freeman Wills Crofts and John Rhode, her membership would not finally win approval until 1946.

Whether Kennedy's objection to Campbell's membership had been based on form or style or something else entirely is not evident. Dorothy L. Sayers had objected, in a 1935 review of Campbell's *Keep Away from Water!*, to what she deemed Campbell's overly-emphatic writing style; yet the previous year she had praised the author's novel *Desire to Kill*, singling out "the soundness of the characterisation and the lively vigour of the writing," which on this occasion at least she believed lifted the narrative out of "sheer melodrama." In her review of *Desire to Kill* Sayers pointed out that the murderer is effectively revealed long before the end of the tale, yet there still is genuine detection involving alibi-busting. Intriguingly, about the time Anthony Gilbert was proposing Alice Campbell for membership in the Detection Club in May 1940, there appeared a new Alice Campbell mystery, *They Hunted a Fox*, which is more of a formal murder puzzle. The tale features a police investigator, Inspector Headcorn, and is set in no less than that great sanctum of murder, an English country house. Whether the publication of this novel may have constituted an attempt on Campbell's part to gain admittance to the Detection Club is not clear (Inspector Headcorn had actually debuted three years previously in Campbell's *Death Framed in Silver*), but it evidently failed to persuade Milward Kennedy. (Alice Campbell, incidentally, is being reprinted by Dean Street Press in 2021.)

After the Nazi aerial bombardment of London commenced in September 1940, there was no talk among Detection Club members of holding membership selection meetings, or, indeed, meetings of any sort. Already on September 12, 1939, less than two weeks after the German invasion of Poland, Dorothy L. Sayers suggested in a letter to Anthony Gilbert that then Treasurer Helen Simpson be promoted to Secretary to replace an incommunicado John Dickson Carr and that John Rhode, a former army intelligence officer, then working in London at the War Office, be appointed Treasurer—unless, she added significantly, "we come to the conclusion that it would be better to appoint people living in the country, for fear the whole of London should be wiped out by the same catastrophe."

Nothing seems to have come of these notions, however, for Sayers was suggesting in June 1940 that Anthony Gilbert herself become the new Secretary ("Some [members] like [Gladys] Mitchell and [E. R.] Punshon pay [dues] without being asked," Sayers bluntly informed her fellow author, "but the majority [of them] wait for the bill"). However, in October 1940 news came of the (natural) death of the Detection Club treasurer, Helen Simpson, and it was thereupon decided to replace her with Gilbert. Between them, Sayers and Gilbert would keep the Detection Club from disintegrating as other London-based members evacuated the city.

The same month in which Helen Simpson died, a worried Sayers and Gilbert learned that bombs had rained down on Nimrod Street, home of E. R. Punshon and his wife, who had also remained in London. "I have just sent out a notice to the Club saying that this

does not seem a good time for [Detection Club] Dinners,” Sayers informed Gilbert, with classic British understatement. Sayers suggested that Gilbert retrieve the Detection Club Minute Book, assuming of course that the Club premises still stood. Gilbert’s replying letter gives an evocative picture of the menacing conditions in England’s beleaguered capital at this calamitous time:

I do hope the bombs do no damage to your flat. We had [bombs] all around us but so far we have suffered no worse damage than one broken window....There are two houses less [on Sumner Place] than there were a fortnight ago. I haven’t heard anything of the Punshons. I don’t feel that he is likely to be put out by a bomb. I feel it would go in another direction if it realized he was nearby.....It would be nice if we could manage a lunch if there were enough of us to attend it....Everything seems very dim and unnatural here....

Gilbert was right: the German bombs missed E. R. Punshon. Whimsically the redoubtable author dedicated his 1941 detective novel *Ten Star Clues*, which he composed over September and October 1940, when bombs were falling down on Nimrod Street, “to THE SIREN whose irresistible song so often lured the writer from his work.”

The following week Anthony Gilbert visited the Club establishment at Gerrard Street and, finding it still intact, rescued the Minute Book and Archives. The key left on the desk not working, Gilbert was only able to retrieve these precious items by employing a nearby scissors on the desk’s lock. “In a remarkably short time I had that drawer open,” the resourceful crime novelist noted, “leaving no clues.” She admitted that the place looked “a bit destitute” with several broken windows, adding mordantly that at least the Club could save money by canceling the window cleaner’s agreement.

Early the next year, in February 1941, Gilbert and Sayers were considering the advisability of trying to hold the annual Detection Club dinner. “I think we must wait and see what happens by May,” Sayers concluded. “So much depends on whether we are being (a) bombed to blazes (b) starved to skeletons or, of course (c) carrying the war into the enemy’s country.” Not surprisingly, despite the optimism of option (c), there was to be no dinner that year. Additionally, the Club premises remained essentially abandoned, a prey to thieves, who invaded it three times during the course of the conflict, pillaging a carpet and other items.

By the summer of 1945 the war in Europe was over, and a serious effort was commenced to get the Detection Club operating again. The Club faced severe financial problems and had to find new headquarters, having had more than a spot of trouble with its macabre-sounding landlord, “J. P. Isaia, Human Hair Merchant, Importer and Exporter,” over the matter of rent. No revenue had flowed into Detection Club coffers since the 1939 publication of a collection of short stories and essays by Club members edited by John Rhode, *Detection Medley*, which had sold about 1500 copies by June 1940. Rhode had informed Anthony Gilbert back in 1943 that the Club had about 300 pounds “stowed away somewhere,” but no one was sure where, financial records seemingly having been lost with the deceased Helen Simpson. Gilbert asked each member in August for an emergency donation of two pounds apiece to tide the Club over its “present critical financial trouble,” which considerably helped, although one member who had a reputation in the Club for extreme and exasperating stinginess, Margaret Cole, tartly informed Gilbert that she and her prominent Socialist academic husband simply could not afford such a contribution.

In September, Gilbert once again trekked to the Club premises to make an inventory of furnishings and other items left untouched by thieves, which turned out to be a goodly amount: a long sofa, a chesterfield, seven leather armchairs, a desk chair, seven small chairs, one large folding table, two writing desks, two small lamps, one chiffonier, one or two rugs, three saucepans (“I do envy the Club the ownership of those three saucepans,” declared the author), glasses, one gas fire, one portable electric fire, several small standing lamps and the books from the Detection Club library. In addition, there was china tea and “some excellent beer (considerably more body to it than anything we get nowadays).” Gilbert took the tea away with her, assuming that “in these times of rationing” it would be stolen by movers.

The next spring, in March 1946, Gilbert visited the new Club premises, leased from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners (the body charged with distributing the Church of England’s revenues), and was not altogether thrilled with what she saw. The new location, she wrote

disgustedly, was “an incredibly dirty room that has been partitioned into offices with different-coloured paint in the various sections. There is a large coal fire, full of soot, and a gas point to which our own microscopic fire can be attached, an electric pendant in the middle of the ceiling (the others have been cut off) and a picturesque gas fixture in the middle of the floor, guaranteed to break the neck of any member of the Club after dinner.” There had been some “magnificent velvet cushions” Gilbert added, “but the Ecclesiastical Commissioners (Trust them!) have carted them off or so I understand.” Still, she reflected, “we can fit most of our furniture into the place and can hide a lot of grime on the walls.”

Despite this rather dismal report, the great news was that the Club was up and running again in 1946, with new officers and some new members approved. Gladys Mitchell had first been asked to replace as Treasurer the long-suffering Anthony Gilbert, who had certainly gone above and beyond the call of duty during the last six years. “It seemed to us,” wrote Sayers wryly to Mitchell, “that you would be the most suitable, trustworthy and well-situated to take the job, and—since you were not there to protest—we agreed to ask you. I don’t think it will mean a great deal of work. For one thing, there isn’t much money for you to treasure.”

Mitchell managed somehow to resist this appeal, but a Treasurer was finally found in the form of the elderly but dutiful E. R. Punshon (seventy-four at the time), who had indeed with his wife survived the awful bombing of Nimrod Street. In 1948, Punshon was able to report that he had discovered a cache of savings certificates deposited to Westminster Bank on Sept. 2, 1940, when the Blitz had begun. “The cash value at the moment will be about L185,” he noted happily, “so we are that much richer than we knew.” Though he referred in another letter to an upcoming audit with new member Richard Hull, who was also an accountant, as “Tuesday’s hair-raising ordeal,” Hull in fact found that the Club had a bank balance of just over 300 pounds (the amount John Rhode in 1943 had declared had been stashed away somewhere). Additionally, some income began to flow to the Club again when an agreement was reached with the BBC to air radio plays by Club members. The Detection Club had returned to life again.

Or had it? Having eluded the ravaging dogs of war, the Detection Club was free to pause for breath, collect itself and...contemplate the dire membership situation. Simply put, the Club stood desperately in need of an infusion of new blood. By 1946, eight of the original twenty-eight members had died and many of the rest were elderly and inactive. (Four more members, including the president, E. C. Bentley, would die over the next few years.) On seeing his fellow members again after the long interval of war, John Dickson Carr, then in his early forties, recalled that he had been “shocked” by their appearances, which he had found decidedly “greyer and more worn.” Even the formerly quite active members Freeman Wills Crofts and John Rhode, who were now in their sixties and living in the country, became less involved with Club affairs. Rhode appears to have stopped attending Club meetings by 1949—Michael Gilbert, who joined the Club that year, never met Rhode—and Crofts’ health began declining precipitously in the late 1940s and early 1950s, restricting him more and more to his home environs of Blackheath, Surrey. (He ultimately died there from cancer in 1957). “I am so sorry not to have been able to attend the Detection Club meetings,” Crofts wrote to Sayers in 1947, “but I have not been too well and have not been going out much.” The same year, another aging member, Henry Wade, also pleaded increased physical infirmity as an excuse for non-attendance, writing wistfully to Sayers, “I am too deaf to come to Detection Club dinners, but I should so much like to meet you again someday.” John Dickson Carr himself departed Britain for the United States in 1948, the intensely libertarian author having found intolerable life in the mother country under postwar austerity conditions and the general misrule, as he saw it, of the ascendant Labour government.

Ironically enough, given his frequent expressed and implied discomfort with the Detection Club fair play straitjacket, the most immediate obstacle to admitting new members to the Club was the man who had originally suggested forming the organization in the first place, Anthony Berkeley. For reasons best known to himself—perhaps he desired to maintain the Detection Club as a rigorously exclusive social group or simply wanted to exert his personal importance—Berkeley after the war began raising objections to the admission of any new members. Between 1946 and 1948, the Detection Club had been

able successfully to admit seven new members (several of whom are among the most admired English detective novelists in the genre's history), in part because Anthony Berkeley no longer was serving on the Membership Committee. But by 1949 Berkeley was making ructions. In January a vexed Dorothy L. Sayers warned Milward Kennedy that "AB...is now plaintively asking why he gets no Club notices....[W]e shall have him back on the Committee before we are many months older—we can't keep him off if he wants to stand!" She added urgently that "we had better hasten to elect some new members before he Molotovs the lot!"

Sayers was right to be concerned. In April, 1949 the crafty and annoying Berkeley sent a brusque letter to Club Treasurer and Membership Committee member E.R. Punshon, grandiosely asserting that he had a veto power over new members *en masse* as the Detection Club's "First Freeman." Berkeley's claimed office of First Freeman apparently had its inception in an observation made by Berkeley early in the Club's history. Noting that there were two "Freemans" in the Club, R. Austin Freeman and Freeman Wills Crofts, Berkeley asserted that as the person who ostensibly had founded the Club, he should be its "First Freeman." (Four decades later, John Dickson Carr recalled Berkeley colorfully declaring: "With Freemans to the right, and Freemans to the left, Freemans on every side, the founder of this club is damn well going to be First Freeman, and don't you forget it.") Berkeley's suggestion was laughingly assented to, but everyone seems to have taken the office as a joke, except the holder of the putative office, Anthony Berkeley. Now, nearly two decades after the event, Berkeley as the Club's First Freeman was asserting near dictatorial powers over the organization.

Incensed by Berkeley's latest ploy and the rude language in which he had couched it, Punshon wrote Dorothy L. Sayers, enclosing Berkeley's epistle and warning Sayers of a dark cloud on the Club's horizon in the glowering form of its First Freeman. Berkeley, Punshon warned ominously, "intends to make some sort of fuss":

I have had the enclosed note from AB [unfortunately but perhaps not altogether surprisingly, this item seems to have been disposed of by Sayers]. It is evidently intended to be offensive. I have not replied and possibly it is better to take no notice, except perhaps as regards the absurd claim of his to hold some special position as what he calls "First Freeman." I have a vague idea that once before he put forward a claim to be a permanent member of the [membership] committee on the same ground.

Although Punshon had forborne responding to the specifics of Berkeley's antagonistic letter, he noted dryly to Sayers that he had sent their "First Freeman" a reminder that his annual subscription was due and had so far received no reply. Like Margret Cole, the tiresomely temperamental Berkeley also had a considerable reputation for stinginess among Detection Club members, to which Punshon was pointedly alluding.

"Bother AB!" responded Dorothy L. Sayers in a letter to Punshon she composed the day after receiving the Treasurer's missive. "I do wish he was not so rude and silly." Sayers concurred with Punshon's recollection of the now infamous office of First Freeman. "The title of 'First Freeman' was bestowed, previous (I think) to the drawing-up of the Club Rules, as a purely honorary title for the original founder of the Club, and rather in jest than in earnest. AB has no right to attend and vote at all the meetings." She added resignedly: "If he tries to make a fuss at the Meeting, the committee will have to cope; but I hope he will have more sense. I am sorry he should have written to you so impertinently."

By the summer of 1949 matters had evidently been satisfactorily resolved, with the First Freeman's self-aggrandizing assertions stymied for the moment. With considerable skepticism, E.R. Punshon wrote, "I gather the reconciliation with AB is now complete and the hatchet well and truly buried. Until dug up again." And, indeed, the hatchet menaced the next year when Punshon proposed that the Club add new member Michael Gilbert to the Membership Committee. Sayers agreed with the suggestion, but warned that the members would have to tread carefully around Berkeley's tender susceptibilities. "Let a (more or less) sleeping Berkeley lie," she warned. "[I]t does seem a pity that he can't manage to be a bit more accommodating. However it is as it is and, I suppose, is likely to remain." Sayers agreed that she and the other Club members would have to keep Berkeley off the Membership Committee, because once Berkeley got on it, "we shall never get any new members during his term in office, because he turns them all down on sight. He has

already during his rare appearances since the war, started to raise grumbles about C[hristianna] Brand, (one of our most enthusiastic members), C[hristopher] Bush (who, though he has his faults, is extremely hard-working) and Alice Campbell.” Sayers closed by sighing, “B. is a difficult man to work with.”

Sayers craftily had been able to reconcile Berkeley to Christianna Brand by giving Brand the keys to the Detection Club premises and directing Berkeley to go to her when he needed them. Brand promptly turned on her feminine charm; and a flattered Berkeley, susceptible in spite of himself to winsome ladies (Brand was not many years over forty), reported to Sayers that he had found Brand “most helpful.” As for Christopher Bush, Sayers asserted that as the new Treasurer (Bush replaced a weary and ailing Punshon in late 1949), he was “now in a strong position” to withstand Berkeley’s grumbles. (Bush is another once forgotten Detection Club author who has been reprinted by Dean Street Press.) Brand later recalled Berkeley as being “in bad health, a bit run to seed and degenerating into sick miserliness.” He “often assured” her that “there was not a soul in the world whom he did not cordially dislike.” Brand believed that she herself was not excluded from the sweeping scope of the First Freeman’s sour misanthropy.

PART III: CONFRONTING THE CRUEL NEW WORLD OF POSTWAR CRIME FICTION

Despite sporadic efforts by Anthony Berkeley to obstruct, like some aging, growling watchdog, strangers’ entry into their premises, between 1946 and 1952 the Detection Club managed to enroll fourteen new members. In contrast with prewar years, sufficient correspondence survives from this more recent period to create a more detailed picture of the criteria employed by Club members in assessing the worth of nominees. John Dickson Carr recalled that “there was usually...considerable debate before a candidate received the invitation for membership; no matter who might be proposed for membership, someone would object that he or she did not write the King’s English or did not play fair with the clues.” While Carr was active in the Detection Club from 1936 to 1948 and later from 1955 to 1958, when he briefly returned to England, he unfortunately was absent during most of the period covered by the surviving Detection Club correspondence that concerns admission decisions. Yet surviving correspondence confirms Carr’s claim that the members engaged in considerable debate about new members. Carr’s biographer, Douglas G. Greene, found the idea of extensive debate over admissions “rather odd for a club that was basically a social gathering, with members chosen at least as much for their conviviality as for any other quality”; yet Detection Club correspondence reveals both that members expected nominees to have attained a certain level of distinction in their genre writing and that comments about the work of these nominees often were bluntly critical rather than convivial. The extent to which a given author had to be a writer of classical fair play detection came more into question, however.

According to Detection Club records, the fourteen new members who were admitted between 1946 and 1952 were, by year: Cyril Hare, Christianna Brand, Richard Hull and Alice Campbell (1946); Val Gielgud and Edmund Crispin (1947); Dorothy Bowers (1948); Michael Innes, Michael Gilbert and Douglas G. Browne (1949); Mary Fitt (1950); Julian

Symons (1951); and Andrew Garve and Eric Ambler (1952). Surviving Club correspondence from this period includes discussions about the nominations of five of these postwar members to be, as well as six other authors—John Bingham, Margaret Erskine, Elizabeth Ferrars, Nigel Morland, Maurice Procter and Nancy Spain—who evidently were rejected. Erskine, Morland, Procter and Spain never became members of the Detection Club, while Ferrars and Bingham did, in 1958 and 1968 respectively—some ten and fifteen years after they were initially considered.

Of the nominees who became members in this period about whom there is no surviving mention in the correspondence, one can speculate that they likely were not deemed controversial nominees. Hull and Campbell had already been considered in 1940, with Hull apparently having been accepted and Campbell having come very close. To Cyril Hare and Christianna Brand one cannot imagine there could have been reasonable objection, both authors in their short writing careers—Hare published his first detective novel in 1937, Brand in 1941—having produced gracefully written fair play classics of the detection genre. Edmund Crispin, only twenty-six when he became a member of the Club, was an astounding detection prodigy who had published three well-regarded novels (although his most recent effort, *The Moving Toyshop* (1946) was rather on the exuberant side by classical standards). Val Gielgud, brother of the famed actor Sir John Gielgud, had authored five detective novels and thrillers, most notably the well-received *Death at Broadcasting House* (1934) (co-authored with Holt Marvell), but he was also an important person at the BBC, where the Detection Club hoped to put on member plays, and a friend of John Dickson Carr, who had written wartime radio mystery plays for the BBC. Dorothy Bowers had authored five well-received detective novels between 1938 and 1947 (sadly, she died shortly after becoming a member of the Club), while Mary Fitt had published seventeen detective novels since 1936, more esteemed for their writing style than their detection, but nevertheless acceptable according to traditional standards.

The discussions concerning both rejected and accepted candidates reveal much about the view of mystery writing held by Detection Club members at this time. Of the authors either successfully opposed or apparently not seriously considered, Maurice Procter, Nigel Morland and Nancy Spain rated little mention in surviving correspondence of Club members, and it cannot be determined on the basis of this correspondence why Procter and Morland did not become members. One can however conjecture that the novels of Procter, a policeman turned writer, were considered too much straightforward police procedurals, while Morland, the hugely prolific creator of the egregiously rambunctious Mrs. Pym of Scotland Yard, might have been dismissed as a subpar writer of low-end Edgar Wallace style thrillers.

Maurice Procter had been suggested as a prospective candidate for membership by Freeman Wills Crofts—appropriately enough, since Crofts had pioneered the resurgence of the professional policeman protagonist in the Golden Age detective novel with his series of police investigators, the most famous of whom was Inspector (later Superintendent) Joseph French. “Wills Crofts (the dear man always pays his subscriptions in advance) mentions Maurice Procter as a member,” announced Sayers in a letter to E.R. Punshon, before adding unpromisingly that she had “never heard of him.” Of Nigel Morland, Anthony Gilbert admitted he was “nothing but a name to me.” Yet she noted, after meeting the handsome crime writer in 1953, that he was “young—I should say about forty—and very active.” (Morland was actually forty-eight, only six years younger than Gilbert.) Youth and energy were practical considerations to an aging membership when evaluating prospective new members.

Gilbert added that during her chat with him Morland (an avidly self-promoting individual) had displayed “great interest in the Detection Club” and she concluded that the author “would probably jump at the chance of becoming a member.” In her response Sayers again plead ignorance: “Afraid I know nothing of Nigel Morland.” However, a review by Sayers’ fellow Detection Club member and successor as *Sunday Times* crime fiction critic, Milward Kennedy, of Nigel Morland’s *The Clue in the Mirror* (1937) suggests why some Detection Club members might have questioned both Morland’s commitment to fair play and his basic talent. “This is not a detective story but a tale of mystery—shady stockbrokers allied to the

underworld, riots in dockland, tales of a terrifying ghost, adventures in France,” complained Kennedy. “Frankly, it is the kind of thing which Edgar Wallace did infinitely better.”

Concerning Nancy Spain’s rejection by the Detection Club, there is more evidence for conjecture, some of it provided by the voluble Spain (another aggressive self-promoter) herself. “Quite entertaining, but doesn’t seem to have clues or detection,” Sayers’ commented concerning the Nancy Spain mystery tale she was sending round for the perusal of other members (possibly *Out, Damned Tot!*). As Sayers’ comment indicates, Spain’s ten crime tales, which appeared between 1945 and 1955, boasted an abundance of madcap, outré humor but generally offered less in the way of cogent detection. In her chatty, cheerfully name-dropping autobiography, *Why I’m Not a Millionaire* (1956), Spain confirms that she was turned down for membership in the Detection Club, bemoaning (with her tongue doubtlessly in cheek) the manifold ill consequences inflicted on her life as a result of this rejection: “I am sure all my misfortunes at that time [in the 1950s] arose from having been black-balled from the Detection Club....because...I was so bad at working out plots.” Spain also provided a colorful, if not entirely accurately rendered, account of Detection Club activities, probably derived from another gossipy informant, Christianna Brand: “This splendid body of men and women meet once a year to praise each other in a vault near Westminster. They carry skulls about on cushions, they light candles and they intone a terrible oath which conjures the members on pain of diminishing sales and returns to stick to the rules of clues and foot-prints.”

Like Nancy Spain, Margaret Erskine and John Bingham at least made it to the point of being read by several individuals before being rejected. The grounds for objections to Margaret Erskine, an orthodox puzzler whose name was advanced to Anthony Gilbert in 1953 by Gilbert’s friend John Rhode, who still kept in touch with certain Club members, arose not from doubts over the author’s practice of fair play, but rather over her quality as a writer. (Respecting the “King’s English” was another injunction of the Detection Club oath.) In a letter to Dorothy L. Sayers, Anthony Gilbert admitted that she was “not awfully impressed” with Margaret Erskine. Gilbert found the author “rather heavy going as she uses short sentences and economises on verbs.” Newer member Mary Fitt shared Gilbert’s doubts about Erskine’s writing style (she noted the “odd punctuation”) but nevertheless declared: “I thought [the Erskine novels] were good...and I am for her election.” Whether other members shared Gilbert’s concerns and, like she did, thought them paramount, is not clear, but Erskine never became a Detection Club member.

In contrast with Margaret Erskine, objections to John Bingham, a crime writer whose name also came up for consideration in 1953 (and was later much praised by Julian Symons in *Bloody Murder*), were based on fundamental doubts as to whether what Bingham wrote could be called detective fiction at all. Although Milward Kennedy was willing to waive the question of fair play (or any play) in Bingham’s case and invite him to join the Club, the general consensus indicated a distinct lack of enthusiasm in Detection Club ranks for the one Bingham novel which all of them had read: *Five Roundabouts to Heaven* (1953). When Dorothy L. Sayers reported to Anthony Gilbert in the summer of 1953 that Bingham’s *Roundabouts* was being passed around for perusal by Club members at the instigation of Milward Kennedy, Gilbert wrote little about the novel, only commenting apathetically that she had tried to “plough through it when it first came out.” Sayers admitted to Gilbert that *Roundabouts* had “received a severe slashing from almost everybody” in the Club. Only Milward Kennedy, apparently, was willing to relax the fair play requirement in Bingham’s favor, blithely commenting: “It is quite entertaining, but doesn’t seem to have any clues or detection. But what the hell!”

Presumably the fatal problem in Bingham’s case was not the quality of the book—*Five Roundabouts to Heaven* has been a highly regarded crime novel since its publication and was reprinted by Simon and Schuster in a 2007 paperback edition with a forward by Bingham’s esteemed former colleague in MI5, the late spy novelist John Le Carre—but rather its very essence as a “mystery.” It simply could not be rationalized, even under the most imaginative analysis, as a fair play detective novel. As Le Carre has recalled, “[John Bingham] cared passionately about the containment of evil. He wasn’t interested in *whodunnit*. But as a master interrogator and explorer of human motive, he wanted to know *whydunnit* and whether justice was going to be served.” Evidently only Milward

Kennedy was sufficiently willing to shake off the restraints of the Detection Club oath to allow the admission of an author whose approach was so antithetical to traditional detective fiction.

A much more traditionalist crime writer, Elizabeth Ferrars, also met with resistance among Detection Club members when she was considered for membership in 1948, although in Ferrars' case there was much more discussion of her merits and demerits and objections seemed rooted in concerns both over fair play and the basic literary quality of the Ferrars novel which the group was circulating, *I, Said the Fly* (1945). Anthony Gilbert confessed "a lack of enthusiasm for it, though I think the writing, surroundings and characters are well above the average." Gilbert's main problem with the book was based on fair play grounds: "I don't suggest there are no other clues in *I, Said the Fly* [than the one she listed in her letter], though I think they are a little unfairly concealed, thanks to the heroine's lunacy in concealing the facts."

New member Christianna Brand, a voluble individual who seems never to have hesitated to offer an opinion on any subject over her long life, emphatically found fault with Ferrars' writing and handling of fair play clueing. Based on her reading of *I, Said the Fly* and several other Ferrars mysteries (Ferrars had authored eight of them by this time, three of them since the war), Brand rendered a verdict of "Doubtful 49%" on the author's candidacy. \She added, perhaps with a tinge of professional resentment over high praise which had been afforded *Fly*:

I have seen [*Fly*] coupled with my own "Green for Danger" as a "semi-classic"—for my part I thanked the critic not at all!...I have read several of the author's books in the past....[T]he ceaseless conversations...drove me to a frenzy. I did not think the plots were very good either, I'm afraid; one at least hung on a fact that the ordinary reader would not know, and the novel forbore to "plant" the information anywhere, which I think is not fair. However, I know Miss Ferrars has a high reputation and I daresay I am just jealous of her being a semi-classic too!

Another recently minted member, Cyril Hare, gave higher stylistic marks to *Fly*, although he too questioned the fairness of the clueing. While Hare found the novel "distinctly above average in style, characterization and convincing background," he added that "the solution, I think, is unfair." Nevertheless, Hare indicated he would be a yes vote for Ferrars, for her book "is a cut above the ordinary rut—and I can forgive a lot for that." Hare deemed good writing a factor mitigating the absence of fair play.

Longtime Club member and former *Manchester Guardian* mystery reviewer E. R. Punshon was rather more grudging than Hare in his appraisal of Ferrars' writing and he too questioned the fairness of her clueing. "I'm not awfully enthusiastic about the 'I, Said the Fly' book," he declared, adding:

My own general verdict would be 'competent and conventional,' though I hope that doesn't sound more critical than I intended and after all I suppose it could be said of a good many other detective stories which do rather tend to get into a groove. It's a special danger of the genre, I think. A more specific complaint is that there doesn't seem much chance for the reader to do any detecting on his account. It's easy to spot the culprit, but only by guesswork, not by logic, and guesswork is more thriller than detective story technique....Other incidents strike me as not very plausible....However, perhaps this is only bad-tempered quibbling....Though I am, too, a bit tired of the character who finds an odd corpse lying about and never mentions the matter."

All in all, Punshon gave it as his tepid opinion that "Miss Ferrars only just qualifies." Attempting to sort out these responses, Dorothy L. Sayers in a trio of letters to different members gave a series of generally negative assessments, suggesting that Ferrars' chance of becoming a Detection Club member had considerably dimmed:

Everyone seems to agree that [*Fly*] is competent, and nobody seems to feel any affection for it.

Everyone seems to think [*Fly*] worthy of consideration, though everybody is exasperated by the idiot conduct of the young woman who chose to nail down evidence in the next room instead of going to the police.

Most...seem to feel just as you and I do about *I, Said the Fly*, namely that it is competent and quite well-written, and that it does not arouse a spark of enthusiasm.

Elizabeth Ferrars was not invited to join the Detection Club that year and she would not become a member until 1958, coincidentally (or not) a year after Dorothy L. Sayers' death, by which time Ferrars had published a dozen more, rather better clued, mystery novels, including 1954's *Enough to Kill a Horse*, which later would be selected by Julian Symons for the Collins Crime Club fifty-year jubilee reprint series in 1980.

Of the candidates who were approved for membership in this period about whom there is surviving comment in letters, Michael Innes, a highly admired exponent of the donnish detective novel who had published his first mystery back in 1936, evidently enjoyed completely smooth sailing, as did Michael Gilbert, an author who had only recently appeared on the mystery scene with just two novels, merely one of which really was a true tale of detection. However, there was much more discussion, pro and con, about the ultimately successful candidacies of Julian Symons, Andrew Garve and Douglas G. Browne. The lengthy comments concerning Browne's detective novel *What Beckoning Ghost?* are particularly fascinating, for they indicate in sometimes amusing detail that the fair play idea was still taken deadly seriously by some active members at this time.

Concerning Michael Innes' successful candidacy, the only surviving commentary is after-the-fact. In response to his acceptance of an invitation to join the Detection Club, Dorothy L. Sayers humbly wrote the highly literate Innes: "May I take this opportunity of saying how much pleasure your books have afforded me personally?" Veteran member E.R. Punshon shared Sayers' high esteem for Innes, writing Sayers, "I am glad to know [Mr. Innes] is joining us. He is a most unusual and very remarkable writer—even though I do sometimes wonder what the casual reader makes of his work." The element of fantastification in Innes' books up to 1949, when he was admitted to the Club, had been quite considerable; yet the author usually managed to endow his genre novels with elements of true detection (barring a few out-and-out thrillers). Presumably the long delay in Michael Innes' invitation to join the Detection Club stemmed from the fact that he had been living in Australia during 1935-46.

Michael Gilbert waited a far shorter time after the appearance of his first detective novel to achieve Club membership than did Michael Innes. Gilbert had actually begun his first novel, *Close Quarters*, before World War Two; but it was not published until 1947. (Gilbert had been a prisoner-of-war during much of the conflict.) Gilbert followed *Close Quarters*, a true detective tale, with two thrillers, *They Never Looked Inside* (1947) and *The Doors Open* (1949); and Gilbert's greatest masterpiece of detection, *Smallbone Deceased* (1950), would not appear until the year after his admittance to the Detection Club. Yet such was the regard in which Detection Club members held Gilbert's debut mystery that they accepted him as one of their own on the basis of this one book alone.

In November 1948, when Dorothy L. Sayers mentioned Michael Gilbert's name, Anthony Gilbert had read neither of the two books he had published at this point, *Close Quarters* and *They Never Looked Inside*. Ever thrifty like other members of the Club in the austerity era, Anthony Gilbert wrote Sayers hopefully: "Got hold of a public library copy of [*Close Quarters*]—looking for a cheap edition—would publishers provide a copy?" At the same time, E. R. Punshon was reading his own copy of *Close Quarters* (the cheap edition?) and was able to report to Sayers in early December that he found the tale "very much better [than *I, Said the Fly*]," with "the advantage of an unusual background the author seems to know well." Despite his positive statement, however, Punshon added a caveat: "I do feel very strongly that it is a mistake to elect a new member on the strength of one book." In Punshon's view, Michael Gilbert "more than" qualified for membership in the Detection Club, but only "IF he can go on producing works of the same standard."

Christianna Brand, on the other hand, had no reservations whatever, offering unbounded praise for Michael Gilbert's maiden effort in the mystery genre: "Close Quarters YES 100%" wrote Brand at the top of her reader's report. "I am entirely in favor. It is a real detective story, and it is delightfully written." Brand deemed Michael Gilbert "the brightest new hope the genre has had for ages." Indeed, so impressed with *Close Quarters* was Brand that the awed author declared she felt certain that "Michael Gilbert" in actuality was "somebody very distinguished under another name."

R. Punshon's stricture notwithstanding, Michael Gilbert was initiated as a member of the Detection Club early the next year, 1949. Soon afterward, Club members learned from

their gratified new colleague that, having published two thrillers, he was planning a return to the straight detection of *Close Quarters* with the new crime novel he was writing. Dorothy L. Sayers wrote Michael Gilbert reiterating that the Club had “highly approved *Close Quarters*” and that it looked “forward to disinterring the small trustee from the large Deed-box [describing the murder that was to take place in Gilbert’s 1950 classic of detection, *Smallbone Deceased*].” Yet over the course of his impressive and prolific half-century crime writing career, Michael Gilbert produced, as Punshon had feared, only a comparatively small number of additional true detective novels after *Close Quarters* and *Smallbone Deceased*. Detection highlights among his later output include *Death Has Deep Roots* (1951), *Death in Captivity* (1952), *Sky High* (1955), *Blood and Judgment* (1959), *The Body of a Girl* (1972), *The Night of the Twelfth* (1976), *Death of a Favorite Girl* (1980) and *The Black Seraphim* (1983).

The Detection Club deemed Andrew Garve a marginally more controversial selection than Michael Gilbert, but ultimately it was Garve who turned down the Detection Club. The author’s name first came up in 1951, evidently at the behest of the youngest Club member, Edmund Crispin (who was still under thirty at the time). Dorothy L. Sayers had read the two 1950 crime novels which Andrew Garve had published under the Garve pseudonym, *No Tears for Hilda* and *No Mask for Murder* (Garve had also published another four crime novels under his “Roger Bax” pseudonym); and she subsequently wrote a letter to Crispin in January 1951 to discuss the case for and against Garve’s admission. “No Tears very competently and No Mask written very well,” Sayers commented, yet she expressed doubt concerning the fair play question. “Does the bit-by-bit detection in the former qualify?” she wondered. “There’s no question in it of giving clues to the reader. Even less so, of course, in the latter.” Alluding to the fair play matter, Sayers agreed with an earlier suggestion from Crispin that “it would be well to find out whether this author’s intentions are honourable.” Referencing the “one or two other books” which she thought Garve had published (presumably she was referring to the Bax books here), Sayers suggested asking around among the membership to see whether anyone had read them. If anyone had, she added prudently, “that might save us the slight embarrassment of questioning him.” Despite this concern, however, Sayers declared herself an aye vote for Garve.

After initiate Michael Gilbert read the two Garve novels he affirmed that he too supported Garve’s election. Indeed, he declared himself “a little surprised to find the body of opinion that this particular method of detection (in which the reader keeps pace with the crime [in *Mask*] or is a little, but not far behind it [in *Tears*]) is in some ways unfair.” Michael Gilbert went on to issue a declaration of his philosophical views on the crime novel, indicating that he for one was in thrall to “fair play”:

I have always thought the surprise ending, admirable though it is, was at best one way of doing the job. I should have thought that in real life crime the police always did know (or have a very shrewd idea) who the murderer was an early stage of the proceedings. Ninety per cent of their work is “pinning it on” the chosen subject....I can find no grounds for thinking that either of these [novels] “isn’t a proper detective story” or is “more of a thriller”....The backbone in both cases is a crime being committed and found out.

Giving further indication of his brash “Young Turk” mentality, Michael Gilbert added that Garve’s “writing and conversation” were “very good” and that the author had “a refreshing habit, in *No Mask* anyway, of calling a spade a spade, or perhaps the Crime Club are less fussy than [Gilbert’s publisher] Hodder.” (I presume this latter comment is a reference to the relative sexual frankness in *Mask*.)

Christianna Brand voiced a considerably higher opinion of Garve than she had of Elizabeth Ferrars, writing Sayers enthusiastically: “I think this writer is a great find, both for detective literature and for us....He writes with a good literary style, can tell a good story and has excellent character building.” Of the two novels, Brand found “No Mask for Murder far the best; its only fault might be that the background swamps the story, but it is an enormously interesting background, and handled interestingly too.” In contrast, Brand deemed *No Tears for Hilda* not nearly “so good....[I]t involves too little action, and if you are going to reproduce conversations verbatim, it means relaying a lot of unnecessary and therefore boring detail; I did get bored by the end.” All in all, however, Brand concluded that Garve “is what is too often, so dreadfully called ‘a must’.” Brand’s only qualification to her

praise was that there was “so little detection” in the two novels, but that did not dissuade her from adding another aye vote for Garve’s election.

Anthony Gilbert also expressed support for Garve, as did newer member Cyril Hare. In a letter to Sayers concerning Garve, Anthony Gilbert, who seemed to have a keen eye for youthful prospective male mystery writers, noted first that the author was “available and quite young.” (He was forty-three at the time.) Secondly, Gilbert informed Sayers that she had read a more recent Garve crime novel, *A Press of Suspects* (1951), and found that it had “excellent background (Fleet Street) and character drawing.” It was “not quite a detective story,” she allowed, yet it was “a distinguished bit of work and if the other two [*Tears and Mask*] pass muster he sounds like an acquisition.”

Seemingly making the judgment for Garve a clean sweep, newer member Cyril Hare supported the author as well, although more reservedly. Hare had read both *A Press of Suspects* and *Murder in Moscow* (Garve’s other 1951 crime novel under the Garve pseudonym) and deemed them acceptable specimens of crime writing. He particularly praised the “admirable and absolutely authentic Fleet Street background” in *Press*, although he dutifully noted as well that *Press* “is not a qualifier as a detective story, because the reader knows all along who the murderer is and watches the police catch up with him.” On the other hand, Garve’s *Murder in Moscow* was “a mystery story, though not a particularly subtle one.” Still, Hare deemed the book’s background “quite first-class” and declared that “the whole idea—two newspaper men unraveling the truth in the teeth of the USSR police is original and well worked out.” Hare rather loftily concluded that “Garve, though a lightweight, has a place in the Club.” He declined to read the earlier Garve novels, *No Tears for Hilda* and *No Mask for Murder*, dryly pronouncing “four detective stories written by the same author altogether beyond my ratio.”

Garve was invited to join the Detection Club, yet in a shocking twist, as a mystery book jacket blurb might say, he declined the Club’s invitation. Why he did so is unclear, although a letter to Sayers from Anthony Berkeley—who apparently was open, for the moment, to the admission of new members—from the next year, 1952, suggests that perhaps the Club struck Garve unfavorably as a snobbish organization. “I met Andrew Garve at a cocktail party this week and spoke him fair,” Berkeley informed Sayers in his inimitable lingo. “He seemed to have rather a wrong idea of the Detection Club, and has promised that if he is approached again he will return a different answer.” Noting this development in a letter to Anthony Gilbert, a somewhat miffed Sayers declared she had informed Berkeley that it was “up to Andrew G. to approach us, and not for us to write humbly and woo him again.” Whoever approached whom first, Garve did indeed become a member of the Club that year.

In his letter to Sayers, Berkeley added that Garve “seems a nice fellow, and not at all puffed up or inflated, though as regards his knives and peas I couldn’t say.” (In an email to me, crime writer and Detection Club member Peter Lovesey pointed out, in regard to this cryptic reference, that, according to Gladys Mitchell, Ronald Knox had introduced “outrageous bits” into an early version of the Detection Club initiation ritual, including an abjuration concerning table manners: “not to eat peas with a knife or to put our feet upon the dining table.”) Like Michael Gilbert, Andrew Garve enjoyed a lauded, prolific crime writing career (he retired from genre writing at age seventy in 1978), but he only sporadically produced true detection. Yet Garve did so enough to win commendation in the mid-1950s from puzzle traditionalist literary critic Jacques Barzun as “the one man who carries on the great tradition of the British detective story by giving it new substance and a new direction.” Professor Barzun added pointedly that “Garve...is not lured by the will o’ the wisp of making the detective story a real novel: It has always been real and Garve knows what the genre ought to be.”

Although it has been claimed that an anti-Semitic Detection Club member initially blackballed Julian Symons from membership, there does not appear to be any surviving material record directly supporting this claim. It is true that there seems to have been a lag between Club members having read Symons and Symons having been invited to join the Club, but why this lag occurred (if it did) is not clear. Expressed concerns about Julian Symons’ prospective membership stemmed not from ethnic prejudice but rather from doubts about his writing style, and these doubts were eventually overridden.

In January 1950, Edmund Crispin sent Dorothy L. Sayers his copy of Julian Symons' most recently published crime novel, *Bland Beginning* (1949), along with his apology "for cadging so many cigarettes when we last met." Apparently Anthony Gilbert had earlier suggested Symons as a suitable candidate for membership, based on her reading of his first two detective novels, *The Immaterial Murder Case* (1945) and *A Man Called Jones* (1947). According to Sayers, E.R. Punshon had been "rather dubious" about Symons' earlier books, so Symons' third novel, *Bland Beginning* thereupon had been sought. Sayers started *Bland Beginning* and immediately deemed it "an improvement, I think, on the earlier book [*The Immaterial Murder Case*]"—not so much in the 'tec part but in agreeableness and clarity. I found it hard to distinguish one unpleasant character from the other in *The Immaterial Murder Case*." In a separate letter to Anthony Gilbert, Sayers commented that she was "now reading and greatly enjoying" *Bland Beginning*. Two days later, she sent the books on to Gilbert, adding her opinion that "*The Immaterial Murder Case* suffers from having a colossal cast of characters, all detestable and indistinguishable. The second book [*Bland Beginning*] is an improvement in these respects, and the twist [Symons] has given to the [John Wayne] Pollard and [Graham] Carter exposure [of literary forgers Harry Buxton Forman and Thomas J. Wise] is ingenious."

Later that year, in April, *Bland Beginning* made its way to E.R. Punshon. After reading the novel, Punshon wrote Sayers that his opinion of Symons' candidacy had greatly improved:

On the whole I should be inclined to say 'yes,' even though I think the character drawing deplorable and the construction and final explanation a bit shaky. But he does manage to produce a readable story and it is certainly an intelligent and clever book. That is, as regards the 'Bland Beginning' story. 'The Immaterial Murder Case' doesn't appeal to me at all, but it was his first story and the 'Bland Beginning' seems to me to be in a different class altogether.

Punshon added that he had sent the books on to Lord Gorell, a titled Detection Club member utterly forgotten today but for the fact that he served with Agatha Christie as co-president of the Detection Club between 1957 (when Sayers died) and 1963 (when Gorell died). However, Julian Symons did not become a member of the Club until the next year. I have located no record suggesting that, as in Garve's case, membership was initially refused, so is it possible that Symons had been blackballed for a year by an anti-Semitic member, as has been alleged? While sardonically describing a Detection Club meeting to Dorothy L. Sayers ("Lord Gorell brought his dull son....Mrs. Punshon...[was] sitting terribly close to the speakers so as not to miss a word, and sound asleep"), Christianna Brand made an observation suggesting modest prejudice on the part of some Club members, though she did not "name names," as it were: "Julian Symons came on his own and seemed to enjoy it all and made himself very pleasant—a good many mildly anti-Semitic jokes were hurriedly bitten off short and all went well." Sayers herself has been accused of anti-Semitic feeling, although this charge had been disputed. The charge receives no support from my survey of Detection Club correspondence.

The admission of Julian Symons into the Detection Club proved the modern equivalent of the opening of the gates of Troy to a certain hefty wooden horse, at least as far as the traditional mystery order was concerned. Apparently unsuspected by Detection Club members, the year Symons was being considered for Club membership, 1950, he would publish *The Thirty-First of February*, a bleak tale of a policeman's unrelenting persecution of a suspected murderer that was inspired by Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and became a landmark in the transition in the mystery genre from the detective story to the psychological crime novel. Certainly the publication of *The Thirty-First of February* did not suggest that Symons sought a career of writing traditional puzzle stories with pleasant characters, but apparently in 1950 no one in the Detection Club was aware of (or, if aware of, was concerned by) the existence of this novel, which was as antithetical to the classical puzzle form as anything John Bingham would write. Symons would spend the next forty-four years of his life exhorting the righteous cause of the crime novel, his most prominent explicit effort in this regard being his mystery genre history, *Bloody Murder*. Symbolizing the final ascendancy of the crime novel even within the Detection Club, Julian Symons was

chosen to succeed the deceased Agatha Christie as President of the Detection Club upon the latter's death in 1976.

PART IV: WAS CORINNE'S MURDER FAIR PLAY?

Ironically, the most detailed discussion of any Detection Club candidacy in surviving correspondence from the period concerned not that of the revolutionary Julian Symons, but that of a mostly forgotten, traditional detective novelist named Douglas G. Browne. After Browne's name was raised as a possible Club initiate in 1948, members lengthily debated not only the merit of Browne's writing in his mystery *What Beckoning Ghost?* but also the extent to which the tale truly was "fair play." In the end Browne squeaked through the gate, despite the apathy of some Club members.

The Browne hare was first raised by E. R. Punshon in August 1948 when he espied a copy of *What Beckoning Ghost?* at a bookstore. With the characteristic thrift of an austerity era Detection Club member, Punshon noted in a letter to Dorothy L. Sayers that the book having been "for sale cheap" he had bought it and read it. Finding it "fully up to [the Detection Club] standard," he sent it on to Milward Kennedy for his perusal. Punshon conceded some faults with the tale, however. For one thing, he admitted, "the characterization might be better." Browne, he complained, "depends too much on 'characteristics,' an unfortunate result of Sherlock Holmes' habit of keeping his tobacco in the toe of his slipper, which makes his weaker brother believe that by such tricks you can make a character come alive. An error."

Punshon also asserted that "the detection is a trifle sketchy." To illustrate his point he offered a fateful example which would preoccupy members of the Club for the next several months: the question of whether the murder of the character Corinne in her bath was fairly clued. "I certainly can't believe a woman like this 'Corinne' of the story would go several days without taking a bath, so that her sponge would be 'bone dry,'" reflected Punshon. Nevertheless, the narrative was "good," there was an "exciting climax," and the use of the London sewerage system was "very ingenious" and original, with the villain coming to a "suitably sticky death." Additionally, the book was "thorough and painstaking—a little in the [Freeman] Wills Crofts line." Punshon evidently considered such no-literary-frills puzzlers something of an endangered species within the mystery genre in the late 1940s.

Milward Kennedy read *What Beckoning Ghost?* and then passed it on to Anthony Gilbert. The pair found themselves in agreement that the book was not an impressive effort. In a letter to Dorothy L. Sayers, Gilbert reeled off a long list of the faults, both structural and stylistic, which she found with the tale:

(1) As a detective story it does not carry conviction. There are not many clues, and there are too many red herrings. (2) I don't believe this sequence of events could ever have happened. Take the first appearance of the ghost....Can a man disappear down a manhole cover and close the lid behind him without making a sound? (3) Corinne's death strikes me as quite improbably farfetched. Consider the time element....I don't think Mr. Browne has ever tried drying and dressing a dead woman in a bare ten minutes. [Query: Had Gilbert?—CE.] (4) All of the dumping of bodies in sacks and carrying them down fire escapes strikes me as pure Hollywood. I like crimes that have some foundation in fact. (5) The

characterization is rather exasperating, one gets tired of the satanic aspect of [Harvey] Tuke [Browne's series detective], of eyes like green fire in a white mask, and too many people have lambent glances.

Unsurprisingly, Anthony Gilbert agreed with Milward Kennedy that more should be seen of Browne's work before the Club voted him in as a new member.

After reading *Ghost* for themselves, Dorothy L. Sayers and Christianna Brand joined in the debate with great gusto. Along with Anthony Gilbert, Sayers became rather strikingly fascinated with the question of the logistics of Corinne's bathtub murder. Overall, Sayers explained in a letter to Milward Kennedy, she was favorably disposed toward Browne. She found the author's detective "a patent imitation of Carr's Sir Henry Merrivale" [surely Sayers meant Carr's Henri Bencolin—CE]; yet otherwise she deemed the characterization "pretty satisfactory." Additionally the culminating sewer chase was "written with that vivid particularity which comes of good local knowledge" and was "very exciting." Concerning the true nature of Corinne's demise, Sayers thought that Browne's clues were fairly laid. She elaborated on this point at some length:

As regards the bath-sponge, E. R. Punshon isn't being quite fair. The author doesn't say the girl hadn't had a bath for three days, but that she hadn't used the immense sponge for three days, but had probably only "lain about and soaked." That, I think, is possible. I find myself that an over-big bath-sponge is sometimes a nuisance, and we might not bother to use it....It would have been better to mention that there was, in addition, a small Turkish face sponge, or a face-cloth or what not....Also it was perhaps an error to call the sponge bone dry—though it might well have been drier than 48 hours would warrant. "Practically" bone-dry would have been better. I will soak my big sponge and see.

As Sayers went and soaked her big sponge, Anthony Gilbert penned a reply in which she declared that, as regarded Corinne's bathtub drowning and the murderer's treatment of her dead body, she for one was having none of it, believing as she did that the whole sequence was absurd:

The husband is out of the room for ten minutes. During that time he has to drown his wife, remove her from the bath and dry her (no easy job when it is a dead body); he has to dress her in the underclothes and stockings she has previously been wearing, and fine evening stockings take some time to put on properly on dry and living legs; he has to get her into a coat and skirt and some sort of blouse and dump her in the cupboard. He does all this dressing without dislodging the bathing cap and apparently without getting himself wet beyond his shoes....And surely, surely there would have been water on the bathroom floor, more than could be accounted for by a flung sponge.

Christianna Brand was not quite so hostile to *Ghost* as Anthony Gilbert. While Brand deemed the book "on the whole very dull" with "too much talk" and cold, insufficiently delineated characters, she nevertheless asserted that the murder "plan was ingenious and well worked out" and that the "clues were very fairly sprinkled" over the pages. As to the matter of poor Corinne's bathtub liquidation, Brand admitted with mock ruefulness: "My sponge is nylon, so experiments were useless." She agreed with Gilbert and Kennedy that "further research into Mr. Browne's works" was merited. If such further research was taken (Browne had written two earlier Harvey Tuke detective novels, *Death Wears a Mask* and *Too Many Cousins*, as well as seven earlier, Tukeless crime tales), it must have produced a result favorable to Browne, for the author was admitted to the Club the next year, in 1949. But it had by no means been a sure thing.

Of the postwar initiates discussed so far, Andrew Garve was the last admitted, due to his initial rejection of the invitation to join that the Detective Club had extended to him. However, another individual who so far has gone unmentioned here, Eric Ambler, also joined the Detection Club the same year as Garve (1952), having just published, after an eleven year lapse, another genre novel, *Judgment on Deltchev* (1951). I have located no mention of Ambler in surviving letters of Detection Club members, so have no way of knowing whether his candidacy was considered controversial at the time. Yet a good case can be made for his admission to the Club, even on traditional fair play grounds.

The fact that Eric Ambler is known as a spy novelist—most authorities view him as the main founder of the modern, more realistic espionage tale—could lead one to think that Detection Club members might well have balked at his admission. Yet some of Ambler's

pre-1952 novels have elements of detection in them, most notably his acknowledged genre masterpiece, the extremely sophisticated *A Coffin for Dimitrios* (1939) (in the UK, *The Mask of Dimitrios*). In *Dimitrios*, the protagonist, Charles Latimer, is an English mystery writer who confronts real murder for the first time in his life and determines to investigate it himself. Although quite a successful detective novelist ("From the great army of university professors who write detective stories in their spare time, Latimer soon emerged as one of the shamefaced few who could make money at the sport"), Latimer is ironically exposed as not the most coruscating of amateur detectives. However, with an Inspector French-like doggedness he diligently investigates his real life problem and his investigation produces deductions along the way, some of them correct. Most strikingly, Ambler unveils a well-laid, classical and pivotal twist near the end of the tale. Moreover, the reflections on detective fiction which Ambler scatters throughout the novel are amusing and sometimes profound.

Especially droll is Ambler's Turkish policeman, Colonel Haki, a self-confessed addict of Anglo-American detective fiction: "I get all the latest *roman policiers* sent to me from Paris," Col. Haki tells Latimer. "I read nothing by *romans policiers*. I would like you to see my collection. Especially I like the English and American ones. All the best of them are translated into French. French writers themselves, I do not find sympathetic. French culture is not such as can produce a *romans policier* of the first order." Yet Ambler's observations on the nature of detective fiction frequently are fascinating as well. "Here was a real murder," Latimer thinks:

Not neat, tidy book-murder with corpse and clues and suspects and hangman, but murder over which a chief of police shrugged his shoulders, wiped his hands and consigned the stinking victim to a coffin. Yes, that was it. It was real. *Dimitrios* was or had been real. Here were no strutting paper figures, but tangible evocative men and women....The worlds of escape, the fantasies you created for your own comfort were well enough if you could live within them. But split the membrane that divided you from the real world and the fantasies perished. You were free and alive, but in a world of frustration.

As the author of at least one great masterpiece of mystery, *A Coffin for Dimitrios*, Eric Ambler was more than qualified for Detection Club membership, in my opinion, and evidently Detection Club members recognized this truth as well. Possibly Julian Symons, admitted to the Detection Club the previous year and a lifelong admirer of Ambler's realistic spy fiction, helped usher Ambler into membership. Even the notoriously cantankerous Anthony Berkeley had highly praised Eric Ambler in his 1930s crime fiction reviews, however. In them Berkeley declared that Ambler would elevate the thriller to the level of literature, just as Dorothy L. Sayers had the detective story. Yet Julian Symons pointed out in his 1972 genre survey, *Bloody Murder*, that Ambler's "thrillers," particularly *A Coffin for Dimitrios*, were graced as well with the intricate construction of the best detective novels. Ambler "showed from the beginning a high skill, which became mastery, in the construction of plot," he noted.

Despite the satire which he directed at Latimer in *A Coffin for Dimitrios*, Ambler himself was not hostile by any means to detective fiction, so it seems unlikely that he would have been perceived as provokingly hoity-toity by Detection Club members. In his 1985 memoir, *Here Lies*, the author modestly recalls that he started writing spy thrillers rather than detective fiction in part out of a recognition that he could not "hope to match the Golden Age ingenuities of crime novelists [and Detection Club members] like Anthony Berkeley and John Dickson Carr." Additionally, in his 1991 collection of short stories, *Waiting for Orders*, Ambler notes that in the 1930s he "had read the great masters of the [detective fiction] genre, admired their fearsome ingenuities and enjoyed the literary parlor game they had made of their creation."

In fact Ambler published six detective short stories—complete with a colorful, mannerism-prone series detective, the refugee Czech policeman Dr. Jan Czissar—in 1940, the year after the appearance of *A Coffin for Dimitrios*. Although the stories are slight, the narratives are charming and each offers readers examples of true fair play detection. (The cleverest of the group is, perhaps, *The Case of the Overheated Service Flat*.) Eager to get things right in *The Intrusions of Dr. Czissar*, as the series was named, Ambler purchased the two-volume *Taylor's Principles and Practice of Medical Jurisprudence*. "Any approach of mine to the puzzle problem was bound to be less fanciful [than that of the great genre

masters], but at least it could be workmanlike,” recalled Ambler. “I must not disgrace myself by cheating the reader. The plots must work.” Happily, Ambler found that a “couple day’s browsing [in *Taylor’s*] gave me the technical material for six cosy little murder mysteries; six little puzzles with six solutions that could be explained briefly and without elaborate dissection of alibis.”

In combination with his great crime novel *No Coffin for Dimitrios*, his considerable worldwide critical reputation and his own clear admiration for detective fiction, Eric Ambler’s *The Intrusions of Dr. Czissar* likely made the author’s admission into the Detection Club a sensible call for members. Yet the embrace of Eric Ambler by the Detection Club undeniably was a pivotal moment in the Club’s history, for the author was most often categorized as a spy novelist or, more shocking yet, a writer of “thrillers”; and he had contributed much more to the thriller genre than to detective fiction. Intriguingly the first genre novel penned by Ambler after his admittance to the Detection Club was *The Schirmer Inheritance* (1953), the plot of which revolves around a dispute over a will and confusion over identities—devices which could have come straight out of a Golden Age classical puzzle mystery. There also is investigation on the model of *A Coffin for Dimitrios*, although there is no grand fair play twist in *Schirmer* as there is in *Dimitrios*.

Over time, particularly after the death of Dorothy L. Sayers in 1957, the Detection Club would further relax its old fair play requirement, originally erected to fence off the detective novel from the ostensibly lowly thriller. Finally the fair play rule was set aside as a fixture of the Detection Club oath in the 1960s. But although this action marked a dramatic change for the Club, its seeds had been planted much earlier, arguably as far back as the organization’s inception in 1930. While Detection Club members in the postwar years resisted setting aside the fair play requirement for membership, in practice if a prospective member was perceived to be a particularly talented writer, they seeming willing to bend—if not break—the rule. Far from being an artistically hidebound organization, the Detection Club in this period actually proved creatively receptive of new members. The Club’s old guard may have genuinely cared how fairly Corinne’s ghastly bathtub demise had been clued, but when it came down to bloody tacks the matter of the shaky commitment to the principle of fair play of crime writers like Andrew Garve, Julian Symons and, presumably, Eric Ambler was allowed rather to slide. Such a stance should not be surprising from an organization with many members who themselves had challenged rigid genre orthodoxy in the heyday of their own work and who realized that for the Club to survive in the postwar world of the “crime novel” no small measure of critical flexibility in evaluating prospective initiates was required.

Note:

For the surviving Detection Club correspondence, see the Dorothy L. Sayers Papers, Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College. The Dorothy L. Sayers letters held at Wheaton College are copyright David Higham.

<https://crimereads.com/the-detection-club-and-the-mid-century-fight-over-fair-play-in-crime-fiction/>



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