

Scotland and the Spy Story

By Penny Fielding

At a time of national and political tensions and a potential invasion from another European nation, a young man finds himself in a country that is not his own. To his surprise, he is arrested and interrogated by a local magistrate. He is appalled to discover that his recent movements, letters sent to him from a suspected traitor, and some items that have been found among his possessions are used to incriminate him. A narrative of treasonous activities seems to explain his recent experiences as the behaviour of a spy, although as far as he is concerned, he is completely innocent and the victim of circumstances. Of what novel is this plot? The answer, of course, is not simple. On the one hand I have described the incident in *Waverley* at Cairnvreckan in which Edward Waverley is arrested by Major Melville:

Beset and pressed on every hand by accusations, in which gross falsehoods were blended with such circumstances of truth as could not fail to procure them credit, —alone, unfriended, and in a strange land, Waverley almost gave up his life and honour for lost, and, leaning his head upon his hand, resolutely refused to answer any further questions, since the fair and candid statement he had already made had only served to furnish arms against him.¹

With very slight changes, this could also be the plot of one of a number of thrillers by one of the best mid-century spy writers, Eric Ambler (it most closely resembles his 1938 novel *Epitaph for a Spy*) and the various elements of the Cairnvreckan episode are widely found in espionage fiction.

We should not be surprised by this — Scott's reinvention of the 'Historical Romance' is after all moment shared with the incipient spy thriller. His novel-writing career is coterminous with a post-war social fear about the use of spies by Lord Liverpool's administration, leading to a front page leader in the newly-founded *Scotsman* newspaper on July 5 1817 (no. 24) that warned of a general corruption of society: 'But does not the mere acknowledgment of employing spies generate a feeling of distrust and insecurity?'

If Romance is a space that allows social realism to be transformed into myth,

excitement and enjoyment, then who better to flourish in this society than someone who can trade secrets with anyone, and is not too scrupulous about where their money comes from? Someone like, perhaps, Scott's Rob Roy McGregor, who moves round the novel fixing, enabling, swapping disguises, languages and political allegiances, lurking round pillars in Glasgow cathedral to warn the unsuspecting Frank Osbaldistone that he is in danger in that city.

Robert Louis Stevenson thought *Rob Roy* was Scott's best novel. And Stevenson also has a main character who is both a spy and a double agent, as well as being one of the most famous boy heroes in literature. Jim Hawkins is a good agent, giving the officers of the *Hispaniola* advance warning of the mutiny when, hiding in an apple barrel, he overhears them plotting. But Stevenson also draws Jim as an ethically ambiguous character whose skills as a spy are not always advantageous to him. His allegiance to Squire Trelawney is tested by his attraction to Long John Silver as he moves between the parties, he loses his sense of self, and ends up associating his experiences with nightmares of an island to which he refuses ever to return. Stevenson's later novel *The Master of Ballantrae* marks to an even greater extent the spy as a rootless, shifting figure. James Durie betrays the Jacobite cause and pursues a career of cold-blooded duplicity across the global conflicts of the Seven Years War.

These examples remind us of a crucial difference between the detective and the spy in fiction. Whereas detectives are classically associated with one location (Rebus and Edinburgh, Morse and Oxford) spies range across local and frequently national borders. Detectives on the whole tend to be faced with a specific set of circumstances — a case — which, when it is fully understood, forms the narrative of the novel. In its classical form the detective (Poirot, for example) assembles the suspects in one place and recounts to them the sequence of events as a narrative of cause and effect before dramatically pointing to the guilty party. Spy novels tend to have a much less determinable plot. Allegiances shift, national powers may manoeuvre for supremacy, but with no specific outcome, the accumulation or circulation of knowledge for itself rather than for the preservation of a particular secret may be what is at stake. The spy is not necessarily the figure who gradually uncovers the mystery (in John Le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* the central character does not realise he is being used by his own secret service until almost the end of the novel). Spies are either hapless, even accidental (like Edward Waverley) or adaptable to changing circumstances (like Rob Roy).

For these reasons, the spy novel more than the detective story seems to tackle the problems of the modern world — a world in which individual identity seems to be under attack from the global forces that we see today, including war, economic dysfunction, the weakening of national control. This is certainly the opinion expressed in a conversation between Richard Hannay and his doctor in John Buchan's 1924 novel *The Three Hostages*. Dr Greenslade tells Hannay that the post-war world is suffering from a kind of mental condition that cannot be contained in the traditional detective story:

I hardly meet a soul who hasn't got some light kink in his brain as a consequence of the last seven years. [...] Now, how are you going to write detective stories about that kind of world on the old lines? You can take nothing for granted, as you once could, and your argus-eyed, lightning-brained expert has nothing solid with which to build his foundations.²

The villain of this novel, Dominick Medina, is of no particular nation — Irish and of Spanish extraction he has a face that is 'very English, and yet not quite English' (52). His kidnapping of three hostages is to safeguard his fiendish international plot, but the novel never really makes it clear what that plot is. Similarly, the breaking of this global conspiracy is seen only in glimpses — neither Hannay nor his masters in the British government steps in to connect it up for the reader:

Odd things seemed to be happening up and down the whole world. More than one ship did not sail at the appointed hour because of the interest of certain people in the passenger lists; a meeting of decorous bankers in Genoa was unexpectedly interrupted by the police; offices of the utmost respectability were occupied and examined by the blundering minions of the law; [...] a Senator in Western America, a high official in Rome, and four deputies in France found their movements restricted, and a Prince of the Church, after receiving a telephone message, fell to his prayers. (237)

The Three Hostages assumes that there really are forces of global reach whose power is hidden in imperceptible details: 'the press was full of strange cases, which no one seemed to think of connecting'. (263)

The position of Scotland in this world is an interesting one. Although Medina's conspiracy is defeated in *The Three Hostages*, he remains at large. The plot has been solved, but the novel is not over and Buchan writes an additional ending in which Medina pursues Hannay up to the Highlands, where Hannay is on a

shooting trip. (It's not hard to see how the recent Bond film *Skyfall*, was influenced by Buchan). The final chapter is structured by Hannay's detailed account of his final engagement with Medina in which he is able to give us as chapter subheadings the exact times at which everything happens: 9 a.m. to 2.15 p.m.; 2.15 p.m. to about 5 p.m. Scotland is produced at the end of the novel as a silent kind of propaganda. It is the place where the terrors of modernity can be suspended to clear a space for autonomous events, and especially the traditional events of the adventure which follow the romance structure. Hannay doesn't know Medina is pursuing him so he is the actant rather than the author of the story, but his actions are decisive and autonomous. Time and place are no longer forms of global alienation but are restored to the individual hero and his bodily experience. The novel finally produces a resolution not through explanation but through action: Medina falls off a cliff, Hannay passes out with exhaustion, the novel is over.

The two endings — cut off from each other in locality and narrative style — produce Scotland as a Romance space that does not fit easily into the modern world, a theme that we can see early in Buchan's writing. He had already explored Scotland as a location for the spy story, most famously in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915). Here again, at first glance, Scotland seems to be recuperative, and readable through action and experience. Hannay escapes the Germans by blowing up the side wall of the cottage in which he is imprisoned (his captors having failed to take into account his training as a mining engineer). But, as in *The Three Hostages*, Scotland is not a place to deal with international conspiracies. The schemes of the Black Stone conspirators are confounded in the setting of a villa on the South Coast of England during the unromantic circumstances of a game of bridge. For all Hannay's Scottish roots, he is himself a global figure who can fit in anywhere by employing a mental trick he has learned in his colonial experience of imagining himself into any physical background. Even Scotland itself becomes an imaginary space that he uses to appropriate the memories of the road-mender he is impersonating to escape his German pursuers:

I remember an old scout in Rhodesia, who had done many queer things in his day, once telling me that the secret of playing a part was to think yourself into it. [...] So I shut off all other thoughts and switched them on to the road-mending. I thought of the little white cottage as my home, I recalled the years I had spent herding on Leithen Water, I made my mind dwell lovingly on sleep in a box-bed and a bottle of cheap whisky.³

With Scott, Stevenson and Buchan we can trace an evolution of the Scottish spy story that deals with the role of spies in the modern world. The particular association of the Scottish novel with the mode of Romance creates both opportunities and challenges for these novelists in which spying tests the boundaries both of individual characters and the position of the nation in an uncertain world.

(c) The Bottle Imp