The Blanket of the Dark

By James Robertson

> Come, thick night,
> And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
> That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
> Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
> To cry, *Hold*, *hold*!
> — Lady Macbeth, *Macbeth*, Act 1, Scene 5.

1.

When we first encounter Lady Macbeth, she is already gearing herself up to commit murder. In plotting Duncan's death, she double-wraps the deed, if you like. She wants it to be done but for it to be invisible to her, the perpetrator, and even to the weapon itself. The phrase 'the blanket of the dark' reinforces that sense of the head knowing, but unable to see and therefore able to deny, what the hand is doing.

We know that the denial of responsibility for terrible acts is not unique to the most repressive political regimes. Indeed, arguably those who consider themselves democrats and liberals and want to be seen as such by the world have the most to lose by admitting such responsibility.

It is incumbent on any state to protect its people from those who would seek to harm them. But what if the state perceives itself to be under threat from some of its own people? How does one identify 'the enemy within', and once identified what do you do with or to them? Who spies on whom in these circumstances, and for what purpose? Can we be sure that the state's secret servants are not wielding knives with their eyes averted?

2.

The Blanket of the Dark is a 1931 novel by John Buchan. Set in England in 1536, it concerns a conspiracy to overthrow Henry VIII and replace him with a rival

who, when the novel opens, is not even aware of his lineage and claim to the throne. The phrase ‘the blanket of the dark’ occurs nine times in the course of the novel, and is used as a kind of code to verify someone’s identity or their trustworthiness, but it also refers both to the tyranny under which England lies and to the cover under which men are working to overthrow that tyranny.

Like his ‘shockers’, Buchan’s historical novels are full of conspiracies, spies, double-dealers and disguises. A secret society exists below the surface of the world: in *The Blanket of the Dark* it is composed of beggars and travelling people who appear to have no power at all but actually are the backbone of old England; and they are a force for good, opposed to the greed and oppression of their social superiors. In other Buchan novels we find similar secret networks at different historical moments: for example, the Free Fishers in the Napoleonic-era novel of the same name, or the Spoonbills in the Jacobite novel *Midwinter*. There is a theme here: the common people know more than their rulers think they know, and they are also, generally, grounded by their attachment to the land. Their values are simple, traditional and wholesome.

Compare these largely benevolent forces with ‘the Black Stone’ in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), a network of anarchists and German spies, who have managed to infiltrate the British establishment as high as the position of First Sea Lord. The adventures of Richard Hannay are usually sparked by such conspiracies. Hannay, a man of action and adventure, is the ancestor of James Bond and a link between Bond and Sherlock Holmes. (Holmes, remember, doesn’t just solve murders and thefts: he acts as a spy for the British Government in several stories, while his brother Mycroft also has some high-powered, never defined government intelligence role.) But another strand in Buchan’s ‘shockers’ involves a more sedentary hero, barrister and Tory MP Sir Edward Leithen, who first appears in *The Power-House* (1913). Leithen is less hands-on and more cerebral than Hannay, but this doesn’t make the Leithen tales any less interesting than the Hannay ones.

In *The Power-House* Buchan explores more deeply the threat to the British Empire posed by enemies who are not nation-states. ‘The Power-House’ is an anarchist organisation intent on destroying Western civilisation. The arch-villain Andrew Lumley is urbane and intelligent, and moves in the highest social circles. At their first meeting, Leithen and Lumley have an after-dinner discussion in which Leithen describes lawyers like himself as ‘the cement of civilisation’.

Lumley, in one of Buchan's best known passages, challenges this view:

> 'Did you ever reflect, Mr Leithen, how precarious is the tenure of the civilisation we boast about? […] You think that a wall as solid as the earth separates civilisation from barbarism. I tell you the division is a thread, a sheet of glass. A touch here, a push there, and you bring back the reign of Saturn.'

He elaborates further:

> 'Civilisation is a conspiracy […] Modern life is the silent compact of comfortable folk to keep up pretences. And it will succeed till the day comes when there is another compact to strip them bare.'

If Richard Hannay is the father of James Bond, then Andrew Lumley is the wicked uncle of Blofeld and Goldfinger. Buchan, through his novels, was exploring ideas about how the real world works. For all his lightness of touch, he had serious things to say.

3.

One of Scotland's best, but under-rated, modern writers was Frederic Lindsay (1933–2013). He wrote more than a dozen novels, including eight featuring the Edinburgh detective Jim Meldrum, but his most intriguing is his first, *Brond*, published in 1983. *Brond* came out a decade after the TV version of Tory MP Douglas Hurd's thriller *Scotch on the Rocks*, and Lindsay's novel was a counter to Hurd's depiction of Scottish Nationalists as either fools or thugs. Brond, the villain, is a British secret agent, a mysterious killer hunting an IRA terrorist. It is no accident that his name is so similar to that of Ian Flemings famous creation.

Brond is a very opaque novel. You have to read it carefully because something lies hidden in almost every paragraph, and the unsaid is as important as what is said. It is on the face of it a thriller in which the Northern Ireland troubles have spilled over into Scotland, but really it is about how a state defends itself covertly and by proxy:

> 'The Irish joke,' Brond said conversationally. 'It's a shoddy response to the troubles across the water. The flood of jokes about Irish stupidity isn't really a sign of the fabled British sense of humour […] It's useful politically to persuade your public […] that any people you have to treat firmly are sub-human.'

It is only near the end of the novel that Lindsay makes his political point explicit. Two murders, apparently unconnected, one of them that of an elderly Scottish politician, have taken place: the novel's narrator, a young student called Robert, though innocent of either, has been framed for both:

> 'The people I work for,' Brond said, sounding unctuous, 'wanted an act of terrorism that would make the public detest those who were accused of it. In any case, the old party […] had become a confounded nuisance […] His death solved one problem, and if it could be made to forestall another — the risk, however remote, of the natives here getting restless — so much the better.'

I was impressed by this novel when I first read it thirty years ago. My character 'Croick' in *And the Land Lay Still* probably owes more to Frederic Lindsay's earlier creation than I realised when I was writing that book. In the 1970s and early 1980s there was a good deal of so-called 'tartan terrorist' activity going on. Lindsay's corrective to *Scotch on the Rocks* was that while there was undoubtedly a lunatic fringe to Scottish nationalism at this time, it was also highly likely that the British intelligence services were exploiting, even encouraging, some of this lunacy because it sent out messages to the public of the dire consequences — just look across the Irish Sea — of allowing Scottish Nationalism to thrive.

In the middle of *And the Land Lay Still* is a long section entitled 'The Original Mr Bond'. This section divides opinion: some like it, some don't, finding it difficult and — that word again — opaque. Allan Massie, a fine novelist and a generous reviewer, felt that in order to find drama in the politics of the period I had concentrated too much on the fringe elements of nationalism, the would-be extremists and the spooks who monitored them, and that this wasn't a true reflection of the reality of historical events. But my intention was precisely to interrogate the reverse side of Scottish politics, the undercurrent below main events. The Peter Bond parts of the novel are meant to reflect the paranoia that accompanied the rise of modern Scottish nationalism. This paranoia existed both in the British state's attitude towards nationalism and in some nationalists' attitudes towards the British state. If it suited right-wing organisations and pressure groups such as the Economic League, Aims of Industry and the Freedom Association to whip up fears about reds under the beds and tartan terrorists, it flattered the egos of some nationalists to believe that they were under constant surveillance from the security services.

These paranoias fed one another. They can be illustrated by two extracts. First, here is Peter 'Jimmy' Bond (a failed, alcoholic MI5 recruit sent home to Scotland to keep an eye on the 'mad Nats') doing the post-match analysis of the 1967 Hamilton by-election (Winnie Ewing's famous victory). Peter is in an anonymous building in London, with his ex-MI5 boss, Canterbury, and his new handler Croick (whose exact relationship to the security services is unclear):

> From what Peter's been saying, Croick went on, and from a wider political analysis, we can assess that Hamilton is not, necessarily, an isolated incident. The important question is, how do we make it one? How do we ensure it doesn't happen again?
> There was a suitable pause while they all considered that, or it seemed to Peter that that was what they were doing. He said:
> That's not really our job, is it?
> Canterbury said, What isn't?
> Fixing elections.
> Croick shook his head sadly, implying that of course we wouldn't stoop so low.
> Canterbury said, Why not? but not as if he was disputing the issue, more like a teacher coaching a promising pupil, or a quizmaster on TV: *come on, ten points if you get this right*.
> Well, it's democracy, isn't it? The SNP is a legitimate political party. You can't stop people voting for that, not in this country.
> No, Croick said, in a careful, perhaps regretful tone. But you could say that about the CP too. That doesn't mean we don't watch what they're up to.
> What if people don't really know what they're voting for? Canterbury said. They think they're voting for a fairer, more equal society, or they're asserting a bit of local pride, but then one morning they wake up and find they're living in Albania only with worse weather. Surely we shouldn't allow that to happen?
> Do they get good weather in Albania? Croick said.
> Are we talking about Communists or Nationalists now? Peter said.
> What's the difference? Canterbury said. They'd both change the country irrevocably if they could. There's a balance to be struck between people's aspirations and what, realistically, is in their best interests. You know that as well as I do, Bond. We don't interfere in the political process, but we monitor it.
> When necessary, we manage it, Croick said. Peter's right. It goes without saying that we have to respect the democratic will. We *do* respect it. You're both right. But people should be aware of the dangers, the unintended consequences, of indulging their emotions. They need to be *made* aware of them. We can help there.
> Yes, we can, Canterbury said.

And here is Peter, reflecting, drunkenly, on the other side of that particular coin:

> … here’s an interesting statistic. No, not a statistic, a graph. There are two lines on this graph. One represents the electoral performance of the SNP in the 1970s. The other represents the number and intensity of ‘tartan terror’ events in the same period: pipeline explosions, pylons blown up, caches of guns and explosives found, letter-bombs sent to public figures or organisations, trials of suspected terrorists, conviction and imprisonment of same. Peter has plotted these two lines. He has plotted them so many times he can do it as a doodle. There you go. Horizontal axis: the years, and the months of the years. Vertical axis: votes cast for the big-N Nats, bombs set off by the nasty nats. Surprisingly — no, not surprisingly — no, not fucking surprisingly enough, the two lines rise and dip and rise like a flock of those wee birds you see at the seaside sometimes. Total unison and you don’t know how they do it, twisting and turning and wheeling together so you’d think they must be joined at the hip. But wee shoreline birds don’t have hips. And we’re only talking two lines on a graph here not a flock of birds. And actually one line is slightly ahead of the other, just nudging out in front with the other one coming along behind, then whoops it’s as if the front line gets a fleg from the one at its back and drops off a bit, then it picks up, then whoops there’s that pesky second line again, the one with the bombs and balaclavas, almost as if the graph is saying vote for Scotland’s oil and you get bombed pipelines, vote for independence and you get bad guys in balaclavas. Weird eh how that repeats? A repetitive pattern. Spooky even. Like something is happening and you don’t know what it is, do you, Mr Jock, but maybe you’ll just stick with the devil you know for another five years eh? And another five, and another, until the oil’s all been sooked out of the sea and after that, well, after that you paranoid schizo sheepfuckers can do whatever the fuck you like.

Of course, just because you are paranoid does *not* mean that somebody isn’t out to get you. As we now know from files released eight years ago, Special Branch and MI5 did spy on the SNP, a legitimate political party, during the 1950s and indeed earlier. As the SNP then was of almost no consequence, it is inconceivable that the surveillance was not stepped up in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, when the SNP became a much more serious proposition. This should not surprise us, as the state’s security services were also monitoring the Communist Party, other far-Left groups and the trade unions. Arguably they had a legitimate role in doing this, as all of these organisations, or elements of them, at different times posed different

threats to the British state. During the Cold War Scotland had two priceless assets: a deepwater base for submarines armed with nuclear missiles on the west coast; and substantial oil and gas reserves off the east coast. The USA and NATO could not afford to lose the former of these assets, and the UK could not afford to lose either: a Scottish independence movement posed a direct threat to both.

What is less clear is whether 'dirty tricks' were employed to discredit Scottish Nationalism. I would not expect any files that prove this to be made public any time soon, especially after the May 2015 General Election result. However much the UK Government now portrays North Sea oil as a declining asset and just the worst kind of millstone for an independent Scotland to have round its neck, thirty years ago it was a hugely precious resource to the UK, and it still is; and the same is true of the retention of Faslane as a base for the current and next generation of Trident missiles. It is the natural response of a state whose power is under threat to counter the threat. A question-mark remains over the methods it is prepared to use to achieve that objective.

References & Further Information

This is a much shortened version of 'The Blanket of the Dark: Truth and Lies in Real and Imagined Scotland', a talk given by James Robertson during the University of Edinburgh's 'Spy Week' on 22nd May 2015.

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