

The English Spy and Other Factions

By Donald Smith

The English Spy is one of a quartet of novels focussing on critical turning points in Scottish history, as a way of reflecting on continuing political and cultural change in the present. *The English Spy* (2007) was the first written and published, but the historical sequence is: *Ballad of the Five Marys* (2013), *The English Spy*, *Flora McIvor* and *Between Ourselves* (2009); focussing respectively on the Reformation, the Union, the Jacobite Risings and the Enlightenment. The last book to be written was *Flora McIvor* which will be published in 2016.

This 'Scottish Quartet' was unintended, had a theatrical origin, and only emerged as the pace of events picked up from the Devolution Referendum of 1997 through to the Independence Referendum of 2014. The initial impulse was a play, 'Cradle King', which I wrote to mark the four hundredth anniversary of the Union of the Crowns in 1603. The piece was premiered in John Knox House on Edinburgh's Royal Mile with a bravura performance by Robin Thomson. It explores the relationships between the life of Jamie the Saxt, and the dramas of George Buchanan and William Shakespeare — of which more later.

As the three hundredth anniversary of the Union of the Parliaments in 1707 loomed, I conceived a play called 'Secret Service' focussing on Daniel Defoe's sojourn in Scotland as a spy and propagandist, residing through 1705-06 in Moubray House, next door to John Knox House. Edinburgh features in all four novels like an additional character, reflecting my sense of the city's contemporary political rebirth.

'Secret Service' was considered by the new National Theatre of Scotland and the London National Theatre. The latter gave me very positive feedback while pointing out that some of the essential historical context, such as Covenanters, would be opaque to a general audience. I agreed and put the script aside. But then I thought, could I recast the piece as a novel? It is much easier to provide discreet context in fiction than in drama. Also was Defoe himself not a founding

father of the English novel? At the same time, deceit operates differently in a play and in a novel. In the theatre it is evident before our eyes while in a novel it has to be discerned.

I started on a reworking and immediately found myself liberated by the freedoms of the form, not least the number of characters that became possible, compared to the strict limitations required for a professional theatre production. As an experienced theatre director and producer, I knew that a playwright is in the end the functionary of actors and theatre conditions; now I was a true creator, able to roam at will. Or had I myself become an all controlling back scenes operator, a kind of spy?

Three of the four main characters in *The English Spy* are actually spies, but of different sorts. Father Aeneas Mackay has become involved in undercover activities because of his Jacobite loyalties, but he is a priest and artist. Catherine O'Kelly has become a secret emissary through desperation. She is a gambler by nature and her spying trades on her earlier life as a prostitute. Daniel Foe (he added the 'De' later) is a professional spy and writer. He has, in fact and in my fiction, written a confidential memo for his master Robert Harley advocating the need for the English Government to establish a professional Secret Service, in order that 'secret intelligence' can be gathered and deployed in the interests of political influence and control.

Through Foe, the professions of espionage and writing conjoin, because he uses both to deploy 'secret intelligence' and to influence affairs in favour of Union. But his attempt to direct events has to contend with many other plotters, public and private. Just as the novelist has to draw the threads of a plot together, so the spy must either harmonise a multi-authored web, or trump the other devisings. Yet overall control may remain elusive.

In 1705-07, Foe was not yet the novelist he was to become. In *The English Spy*, Foe is frustrated by lack of reward for his secret service, and the restrictions on his use of secret intelligence to earn an alternative living from public penmanship. His Scottish landlady and confidante, Isobel Rankin, who is herself concealing an alternative lifestyle, suggests that he disguise confidential truths as fiction in order to enter a growing market for printed entertainment. Being a Puritan, and a resolute opponent of popular entertainment in its theatrical forms, Foe is a reluctant convert. However, his spying career has shown the need for

compromise and pragmatism in all things, not least the reconciliation between Scottish religion and English Government. He is persuaded, so making the English novel an early fruit of Union. This of course is my authorial irony, though the real life Defoe's first mention of Alexander Selkirk, the real life origin of Robinson Crusoe, dates to his travels in Scotland at this period.

Which brings me back to the relationship between writing and espionage, namely the business of plotting or control, and the nature or perhaps limits of imagination. In fact and my fiction, Foe opposes the untrammelled fantasies of theatre or popular entertainment, because he adheres to the need for moral judgement, the testing of character and events against a wider truth or 'realism'. For Foe, the ultimate author is God, who oversees all things and sees according to the heart or inner truth. The theology may be outdated but the concept is artistically interesting.

Perhaps there are two contrasting poles of fiction. On the one hand there is the power of fantasy, a surrender to the ability of the medium to transform, transport and evoke counter-factual worlds. This is akin to the power of the oral storyteller, of popular musicals, and of big budget movies. On the other hand there is fiction that asks the reader to make a judgement, to measure the created reality against their own sense of lived experience. The latter kind of fiction is most appropriate to the written word because this medium gives readers the capacity to review, test and reflect, rather than simply be swept along by force of the telling. The written word becomes a form of testimony to be weighed as well as heard.

This impinges on the overall capacities of fiction and the orthodoxies current in schools of 'creative writing', which bear more on today's writers and publishers than previous theological dogmas. The idea for example that 'showing' is always preferable to 'telling' narrows the possibilities in a misleading way. Explicit narrators provide a range of rhetorics and so of novelistic possibilities that should not be discarded, especially in the context of Scottish literary tradition. The Canadian critic, Northrop Frye, saw this when he pushed out the boundaries of literature to include many factual as well as fictional forms of narrative, notably in his *Anatomy of Criticism*. It is significant of course that Frye writes in a North American tradition which, like Scotland, has been influenced by the unique and yet ambiguous status of Biblical narratives of many types, within a wider cultural and literary formation.

Throughout my *Scottish Quartet*, I use theatre and the act of writing as contrasting metaphors for storytelling. Who writes and for what purpose? Who performs and for what purpose? And what happens when the two overlap in the interests of power or persuasion? In *Ballad of the Five Marys* for example, George Buchanan, then Europe's leading playwright, contrives a popular narrative of adultery and murder in order to bring down Mary Queen of Scots. A Queen marries the murderer of her husband the King, with whom she has been conducting an adulterous relationship, leaving the Prince fatherless and in the care of 'a murderess and whore'. The story catches on, and continues to be retailed and believed for centuries. This 'plot' is also used by Shakespeare as the storyline for *Hamlet*, with the intention of flattering James VI, the soon-to-be King of England and his Danish Queen, both of whom are devoted to theatricals. But does that mean that everyone has come to accept the Hamlet plot as James' autobiography — even James himself? Is there an alternative testimony?

Questions of narrative status weave through *The English Spy*, behind the foreground suspense of politics, disguise and deceit. Fiction and faction blend in ways that tease and hopefully challenge. I certainly aspire to entertain, as a storyteller, but at the same time, I would like my readers to make judgements about the characters and their circumstances, and by implication about themselves and contemporary circumstances. Is there a 'Union' narrative that has been popularly accepted when events are messy and capable of different interpretations?

In the end I make no absolute claims; I submit my fiction to criticism gladly, for I am not in total control of language or events. I am not God or his emissary. My 'secret intelligence' must be brought into the light of day. Reality is always multi-authored, and you dear reader, may be my accomplice, a defector, a double agent, or even a fantasist. How do I know? How for that matter do you know? These questions animate forms of fiction that interrogate truth, reality and motivation with the distrust of a spy, and yet simultaneously discover something of artistry and delight in the espionage.