Josephine Tey: Mystery Writer

By Jennifer Morag Henderson

Josephine Tey is best-remembered today as a crime novelist. Born in Inverness in 1896, Tey was the author of eight crime novels, of which six feature her detective Inspector Alan Grant. Her book *The Daughter of Time*, a unique exploration of the historical mystery of whether Richard III killed the Princes in the Tower, was once voted the best crime novel of all time by the Crime Writers Association. Multiple adaptations of Tey's books, including *The Franchise Affair* and *Brat Farrar*, for radio, television and film – perhaps most notably by Alfred Hitchcock – took her stories to a huge audience. Tey's work has remained in print since first publication in the 1920s, with translations into French, Spanish, Polish, Japanese, Chinese and more, and new editions continue to proliferate. Her books have remained popular, and even seen a resurgence of interest, with the newest translation, into Brazilian Portuguese, appearing in 2025. Many writers have spoken of the inspiration they have taken from Tey's work, from Scottish crime novelists like Val McDermid and Ian Rankin, to writers working in other genres such as Stephen King, or writers working far from Tey's native Scotland such as Japanese crime fiction authors. Josephine Tey is a writer that people feel passionate about: a successful bestseller who still feels like a personal discovery for each reader. She is critically acclaimed and has had a lasting legacy in the way that she expanded the parameters of detective fiction and inspired others. Despite this, I still believe that she deserves to be better known and to have her achievements celebrated – not only within crime fiction, but also in the wider context of Scottish literature.

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DAUGHTER
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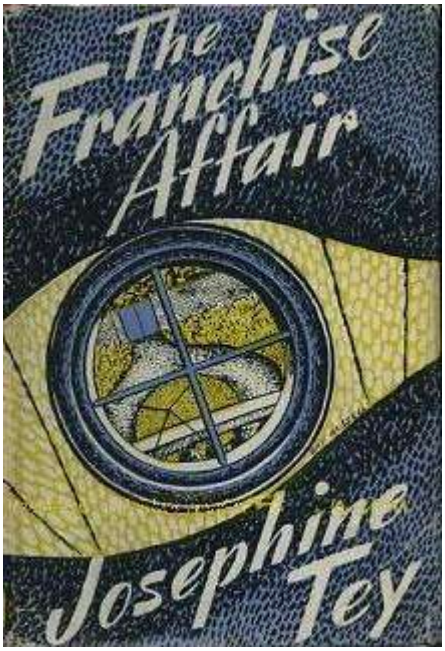

The Franchise Affair
Josephine Tey

Josephine Tey is a writer who is simultaneously exceptionally successful but also, fittingly for a detective novelist, something of a secret and a mystery. Although her work has always sold well, she herself did not court publicity, instead hiding behind several different pen-names. Until I published my biography of her in 2015, very little was known about Josephine Tey's real life, and her work had not been assessed as a whole: not just her detective fiction, but how it related to her other writing and her other pen-names, and how it fitted into the wider story of Scottish literature.

'Josephine Tey' was a pen-name of Elizabeth MacKintosh (1896–1952). Born in Inverness, MacKintosh lived several 'lives': best known as Golden Age Crime Fiction writer 'Josephine Tey', she was also successful novelist and playwright 'Gordon Daviot'. At one point, she had plays on simultaneously in the West End in London and on Broadway, was writing a Hollywood film script and working on a successful crime novel – all from her home in the north of Scotland. She did not seek personal fame, but focused on her writing, producing work of surprising variety and consistently high quality.

The daughter of a shopkeeper, Beth (as she was known by family and friends) was intelligent, and educated well at Inverness Royal Academy. After leaving school, she trained and then worked as a physiotherapist and P.E. teacher. This practical career played to her strengths as an active, independent young woman, but she maintained a long-standing interest in writing, working for many years to

improve, and always aiming for publication. After publishing short pieces for some years, wider success came with her first novel *Kif* in 1929: written under the name 'Gordon Daviot', it was accepted by a major London publisher and appeared in both the UK and US to excellent reviews. However, at the same time Beth had entered a competition to write a crime novel, and, only a few months after *Kif* was published, the first Alan Grant detective novel *The Man in the Queue* also appeared, again to good reviews in the UK and US. Translations followed soon after.

Kif and *The Man in the Queue* were quite different, and Beth saw them as different genres: *The Man in the Queue*, she said, was more of a 'shocker'; a popular detective fiction novel aimed at a wide audience. *Kif* was an exploration of the plight of soldiers returning to a changed Britain after the First World War; a literary novel tackling wide themes. Really, however, part of the appeal of Josephine Tey detective novels is that they too tackle big and important themes – but they do it within the tight construction and forward motion of crime fiction. Beth came to see detective fiction as being like writing sonnets: within the established framework she played with expectations, and took the genre in new directions. Her characters are far from one-dimensional. The reader knows that the book will fall within the expected parameters – a villain will be unmasked or a crime solved – but along the way they are given bigger themes to think about. Beth was applying the same high standards to her crime writing as she did to all her writing.

My biography about Josephine Tey's life – the life of Elizabeth MacKintosh – was first published a decade ago. I have continued to study her work and life, and recently I have been revisiting Tey's short stories and poems, and in particular her earliest writings and some previously unpublished stories, as I assemble them for publication. The specialist American publisher Crippen & Landru plan to bring out a collection of Tey's shorter writing next year, which I am editing and writing an introduction for. Revisiting the early writing has convinced me, once again, of Tey's skill and talent – and it also shows clearly where she saw her own writing in comparison with other writers of her time.

Beth's path to publication began through short pieces: stories, poems, and – importantly but perhaps surprisingly – competition entries and puzzles. Although she wrote short stories throughout her life, her early pieces, in particular, show her literary development, and the path by which she became the 'Josephine Tey'

whose books we love today. As I argued in my biography, Tey very much saw herself as part of a wider literary conversation, and it helps the understanding of her writing to see it, not only in the context of crime fiction, but in the wider context of Scottish literature, and British literature.

Beth is not generally seen as part of the Scottish Literary Renaissance she lived contemporarily to. As a woman, she was not part of the male-dominated literary social scene, which in Inverness revolved around Neil Gunn. Gunn was almost an exact contemporary of Josephine Tey, and in my biography I compared and contrasted their very different work and concerns. Tey was also not a supporter of Gunn's Scottish Nationalist politics, another thing that set her apart from many of the concerns of her contemporary Scottish writers. This did not mean, however, that she was disengaged from what was happening in the literary world. On the contrary, she had several Scottish writer friends, from playwright James Bridie to journalist and novelist Elisabeth Kyle. She was also connected by friendship to many in the theatre world in London, through her time as playwright 'Gordon Daviot', and another writer I compared her to in my biography was her friend Dodie Smith. In the 1930s, Smith had huge success as a playwright, and later she wrote a series of charming memoirs, but, although one of her blockbuster plays was recently revived, we remember Smith today as the author of children's novel *The 101 Dalmatians* and the classic coming-of-age story *I Capture the Castle*. In addition to Tey's personal connections in the literary world, she was a voracious reader, and her letters talk about her opinions on new novels and plays, while contemporaries in Inverness particularly remembered her avid reading of newspapers. To study Josephine Tey's literary connections is to draw out a different picture of the inter-war and post-Second-World-War Scottish literary scene: one that foregrounds women, and draws out forgotten areas of popularity. Our current focus on writers like Neil Gunn or Hugh MacDiarmid is partly driven by our current concerns. Likewise, crime fiction may be what is popular now, but in the 'Golden Age' of crime writing in the 1930s it was only one element of a literary world that still prioritised theatre, journalism and novels.

A key part of the literary world Tey knew was the newspaper. Newspapers now are a shadow of what they once were: in the 1920s there was a myriad of titles covering all angles of political opinion, weekly papers and multiple editions of the same daily newspaper. Newspapers were regularly and widely read, with real influence on politics, and on culture. Newspapers had plenty of space for literary

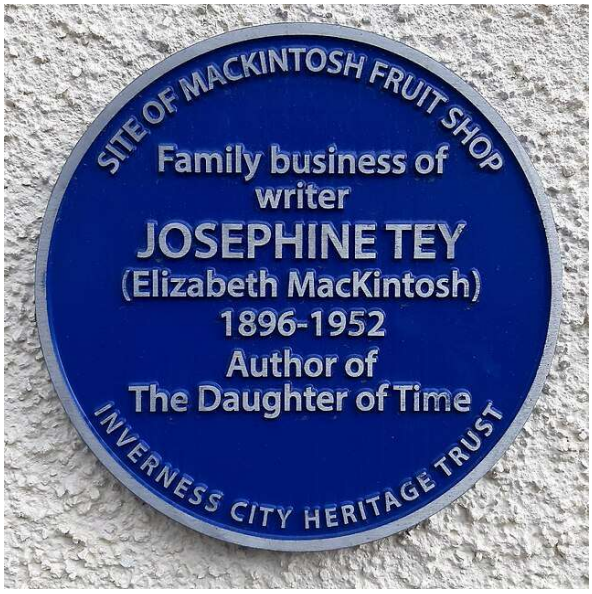
reviews, theatre reviews – and literary competitions. Some of the earliest published work I found by Josephine Tey (writing at that time under the name 'Gordon Daviot') were competition entries. She was a regular entrant to the literary competitions in more than one paper, including, in particular, *The Saturday Review*. *The Saturday Review* was a London paper, originally established in 1855. In 1926 it was edited by Gerald Barry, who started a weekly literary competition. Josephine Tey entered (and won) from the start, in 1926, and then continued to enter until the mid-1930s, even after she had become a successful playwright and novelist. The literary competitions were run at an exceptionally high standard, and each week were judged by well-known and experienced writers, who gave constructive feedback on entries. Tey was not the only 'famous' writer to enter these literary competitions, and they were reasonably high-profile within the literary world, often attracting conversation (famously, Graham Greene once came second in a competition to write a short story in the style of Graham Greene). *The Saturday Review* competitions moved to the *Weekend Review* when their editor Gerald Barry moved there, and then moved to the *New Statesman* when that paper merged with the *Weekend Review*. The competitions then actually continued in the *New Statesman* until 2016. Not only were the competitions popular, they also fostered a real sense of community amongst the people who entered. The same names, or pen names, recur over and over, and 'Gordon Daviot' eventually won the competitions so many times that she (along with other regular winners) was asked to become a judge. The literary competitions are the subject of a study by academic Bill Greenwell, a Creative Writing tutor for the Open University and an entrant himself to the later editions of the competitions. He describes in his researches how competition entrants met for dinner, and how he himself met competitors who had first entered in the 1930s. It is a lost literary world which Tey was very much a part of.

For the new anthology of short pieces by Josephine Tey to be published by Crippen & Landru, I have collected together a whole series of Tey's entries to these competitions. They show how she learnt to write for an audience and how she responded to the helpful – though often harsh – criticisms of the competition judges. Some of the competitions were straightforward: write a sonnet on the subject of spring, for example, but others were far more niche. 'Write a letter to the Times against a proposed tax on beards' was one subject. These were literary games – but games played with seriousness. Writing a 'letter to the Times' involved knowing what such a letter should look like – it involved the literacy of

having been a regular reader, and the ability to write a parody; the confidence to write with humour, and the ability to recognise how a reader would respond to this. The entry from 'Gordon Daviot' was judged to be 'faultless', and she won first prize. These were not small prizes either: winners received one guinea, i.e. one pound and one shilling, which was around three days wages for a skilled tradesman in 1925, according to the National Archives currency converter, or the equivalent of just over eighty pounds today according to other comparison websites. Josephine Tey was not just a good writer in terms of critical acclaim, but she also became a very financially successful writer.

Tey's competition entries were judged by a roster of names that were known in the London writing world, journalists, novelists and poets like Elizabeth Bibesco, T. Earle Welby, Anthony Bertram and L. P. Hartley. They are less well known today, but their influence at the time was huge, and their judgements on what was 'literature' shaped our literary canon. Tey saw her writing as entering their world. It was a world of literary fiction, journalism, and poetry – but all the elements of crime fiction were also there. It seems a good match that Tey, now known for her mysteries, started out by solving puzzles and problems. It also points towards how she later constructed her crime novels. Through her regular newspaper-reading and long-standing commitment to the literary pages of the major newspapers of the day she had an almost-journalistic training. She learnt about structure and audience, writing to the point and in a concise way, driven by the needs of the story, and always remembering who would be reading – but with the confidence to go her own way, in the knowledge that what makes a winner is that extra something that stands out.

When I wrote my biography of Tey I wanted to tell the truth about her life. This means accepting her on her own terms, not forcing her into a contemporary narrative. Yes, she is a crime novelist, and her crime fiction is hugely important, but her crime fiction was not divorced from the rest of her work. Her literary output needs to be seen as a whole, and assessed as a whole. Elizabeth MacKintosh was Josephine Tey, Gordon Daviot and F. Craigie Howe (a third pen name I discovered in the course of writing my biography). Tey is not only a crime novelist, but so much more: a playwright, a poet, a short story writer, a woman writer, a Scottish writer, and a British writer.



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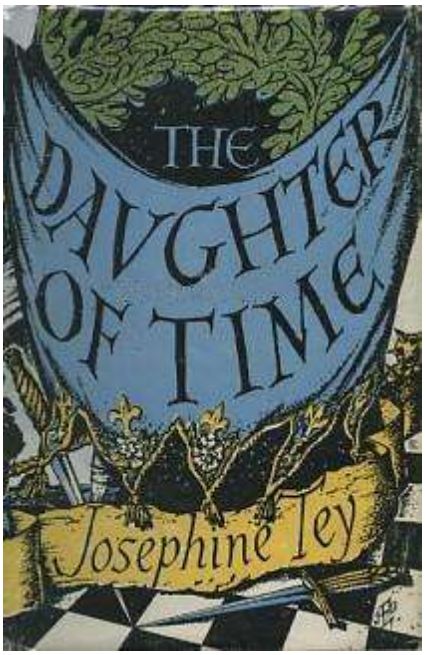

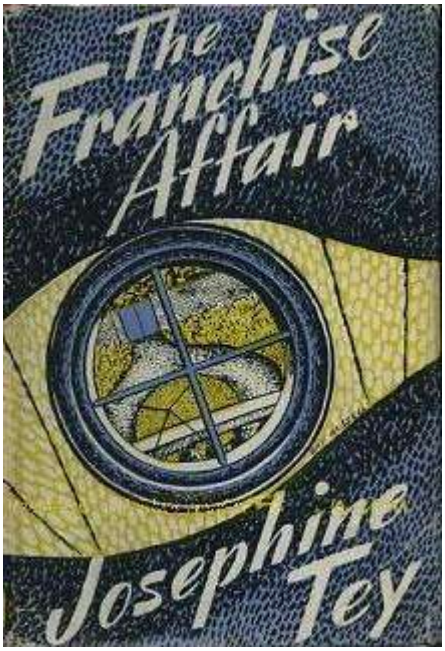

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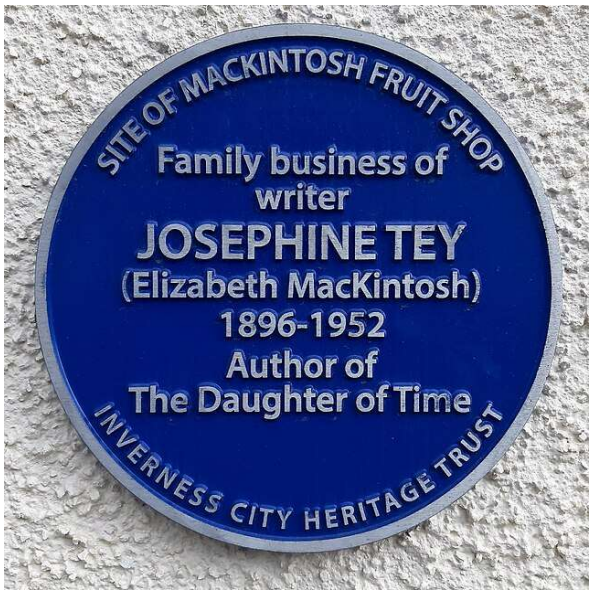

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