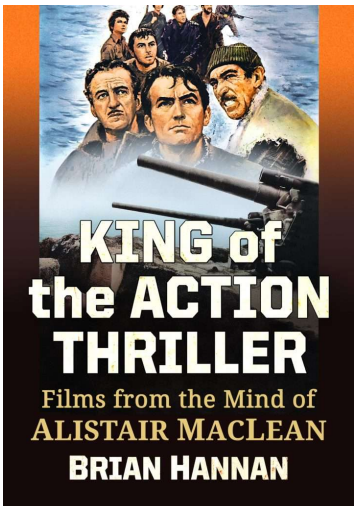
‘King of the Action Thriller: Films from the Mind of Alistair MacLean’, by Brian Hannan

Review by David Manderson



Few signs of the war remained in 1960s Scotland, but the nuclear presence on the Gare Loch, where the subs edged past Rosneath caravan park where my family went every weekend, was one. Another was the book-rack in the park’s shop, stocked with thrillers with stills from upcoming films on their covers. In due course my dad brought me the books to read after they had been passed round. They arrived with broken spines, creased covers and oily fingerprints on their pages.

The men who read them were weekend tourists who flocked to the cinemas to see wartime adventure stories written by a Scot who became the UK’s most successful writer for film. Brian Hannan, the author of this new book about the novelist Alistair MacLean, offers probably the most comprehensive analysis to date of the work and career of this writer and ‘businessman’, as MacLean described himself. Hannan’s research has been helped by access to the producer Elliott Kastner’s archive, other records such as HarperCollins’ in Bishopbriggs and the encouragement of David Puttnam and other writers, including Lee Child, author of the *Reacher* series. The result of this massing of facts in the book’s appendices is that it is now possible to see MacLean’s whole contribution to the

film culture of the Second World War, an input that arguably helped shape our awareness of post-War Europe.

Chapter by chapter, Hannan analyses MacLean's films. The best-known (*The Guns of Navarone*, *Ice Station Zebra* and *When Eight Bells Toll*) are examined in detail, as are the stories of their productions, their financing, their promotion, their casting and the routes each took towards the screen. But Hannan is also interested in the way MacLean writes, and spends time trying to discover what it is about MacLean's style that grabs the reader's attention. One factor is his use of time, with events telescoped, minimal chapter headings and the narrative speed always ramped up. Another is his use of exotic settings, which included the Arctic, the Gulf of Mexico, Florida and even – yes – the west coast of Scotland. A third is his research, a fourth his densely-plotted storytelling which allows twist after twist, creating what Hannan calls 'the narrative pulse' of MacLean's stories. A fifth is the stoical endurance of his heroes. Unlike Bond, McLean's men of action are usually silent, downplay their skills and carry physical or mental scars.

Hannan also guides us through the ways the film industry's relationship with other forms kept the creative wheels turning. One tactic was the 'tie-in' with publishing, which made a new book part of a film's merchandising by using its cover for advertising. Another was the novelisation of the film to a book, a product which could be sold before the film was distributed, while it was in the cinemas or after its launch. These additional sources of revenue allowed MacLean 'three bites at the apple', with books sold from outlets which were much more widespread than they are today, including newsagents' shops, department stores, news-stands, airports, station kiosks and spinning bookracks like the one in Rosneath park.

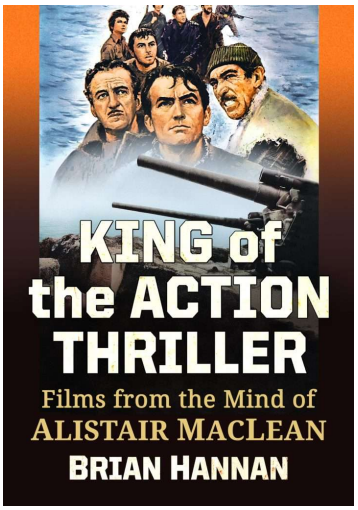
Part of the pleasure of reading Hannan's book is the feeling of familiarity it generates as forgotten parts of our past like these are remembered. The same sense of shared experience comes with Hannan's consideration of MacLean's films. The stories of each one, and how actors such as Patrick McGoohan, Richard Burton, Anthony Hopkins, Charles Bronson, David Niven and Rock Hudson came to star in them, are fascinating. Even more intriguing is the history of MacLean's relationship with HarperCollins. He resigned from novel-writing twice, once to take up a career as a hotelier and then to set himself up as the sole owner and manager of his 'properties'. The target of his fury, Hannan feels, was his publisher. Despite his meticulous research and taut narratives, he felt they were

tinkering with his projects, criticizing them for having ‘too many incidents’ and patronising a ‘mere’ writer of thrillers. A writer could easily feel condescended to by publishing houses with long and illustrious histories, which Collins, established in 1817, certainly had.

MacLean died in 1987 but his influence lives on. Lee Child, a writer of no mean pedigree himself, says of him: ‘Everybody’s copied Alistair Maclean but nobody can tell how he did it. Nobody knows how he did it. They want to find out, but they can’t.’

So MacLean’s works look set to remain the unique body of novels and films that they are, and our lives and heritage feel richer for it.

King of the Action Thrillers: Films from the Mind of Alistair MacLean is published by McFarland.



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