

AGATHA NAVIGATES THE POLITICS OF DEPRESSION AND WAR

Temperamentally conservative, Agatha had a government to suit her in the National Government of 1931-40, a government that convincingly won the general elections of 1931 and 1935 with 554 and 429 seats respectively. Agatha's plots, themes and throw-away-lines were well in accord with the inclusive ethos of stability offered by Stanley Baldwin, the Conservative leader who was also Prime Minister in 1935-7.

One of Baldwin's MPs is George Lee, a gasbag (as he id correctly described) in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (1934), but there is a clear statement of her views in *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933) with the assurance that Poirot is no Socialist. In *Death on the Nile* (1937), Mr Ferguson attacks established institutions and capitalism, describes social position as bunk, pretends to be of a low social status, rejects marriage as a legal contract, laughs at education, culture and death, is not interested in being reliable, repeatedly advocates a focus on the future, refers to some people as parasites or useless fools, and argues that, with the Pyramids, it is necessary to think of the sweated masses that built them, and not the egotistical despots for whom they were built. In fact, Ferguson is the very rich young Lord Dawlish, who became a Communist when at Oxford. Cornelia rejects him for the older Austrian Dr Bessner who is kind, knowledgeable, and cares for the sick. Poirot has the last word on Ferguson/Dawlish who replies to the latter's complaint about Cornelia by telling him that she is probably the first woman of an original mind that he has met. To a modern reader, Ferguson's remark that education has 'devitalised the white races' might be surprising, but ideas and ideologies were fairly jumbled up, including in Christie's telling, and eugenicist thought was indeed characteristic of the Left as well as the Right.

Just as she is hostile to the Left, Christie has no time for the extreme Right. In *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* (1940), Japp tells Poirot that the Communists and the Fascists are both trying to bring down the government which stands for 'good sound Conservative finance.' Possibly the name chosen for the dentist, Morley, is designed to remind readers of Mosley, although Morley is no villain. Blunt, a widower whose wife was Jewish, suffers from criticism from the Imperial Shirts who are clearly modelled on Mosley's 'Blackshirts': 'they march with banners and have a ridiculous salute ... they just work up these poor young men ... until they think they are doing something wonderful and patriotic.' Christie has Poirot hear a sermon from I *Samuel* 15:23 in which rebellion is presented as a sin. The vulnerability of Britain to extremist conspiracy is laid out to Poirot by Reginald Barnes. Solvency and stability are seen as linked.

'Lots of gunpowder everywhere all over Europe. And we weren't ready, damn it!' The comment of Air Marshal Sir George Carrington in Christie's short story 'The Incredible Theft' (1937) captured the focusing of the established concern about air vulnerability in light of the newly menacing

situation arising from the rise of Hitler, not that he is mentioned. In time-honoured fashion, a seductive female spy is to the fore. The Cabinet minister, who may be the next Prime Minister, refers to himself as ‘the man needed to guide England through the days of crisis that I see coming.’

Coming to maturity during one world war, Christie was an adult at the height of her powers during the second. Nevertheless, as she has Poirot and Hastings discuss in *Curtain* (1975), which was written in 1940, World War One was their key conflict of memory and reference. *Curtain* and *Sleeping Murder* (1976) were written in the early part of World War Two in case Christie did not survive it. At the same time, the books were intended as the last works to involve particular characters, and there was no explicit reference to the war in either novel.

World War Two posed significant challenges to Christie. These included personal challenges, not least the air attacks, that motivated her to write these final novels for Poirot and Marple respectively. There was also the question of the content and tone she should adopt for her novels. Furthermore, there was the extent and state of her readership. Indeed, paper rationing dramatically reduced the potential market, and both for books and the newspaper serials that offered additional profit. Printing and distribution were hit by bomb damage and by the staff shortages arising from conscription. In addition, theatrical audiences were affected by wartime restrictions. At the same time, although far less prosperous, and with other claims on their time, including Home Guard duties and vegetable growing, the reading audience had little else on which to focus their leisure time.

Christie had taken her personal knowledge of archaeology so far as to re-site her murder stories in the archaeological Middle East, and very successfully so. In contrast, there was no comparable re-siting of her fiction during the war. It would not have been expected that Christie should do any wartime re-siting in a military setting, but the wartime crisis for civil society was largely ignored. Published in November 1940, however, *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* is interesting (as well as effective in plot, characterisation and pace), not least because of its comments on Englishness and its decrying of radicalism. Being unemotional and ‘so very normal’ is presented as ‘essentially British.’ The dentist sees such character as the answer ‘to their Hitlers and Mussolinis and all the rest of them... We don’t make a fuss over here. Look how democratic our King and Queen are.’ There is an attempt by an Indian to assassinate the Prime Minister. The novel bridges pre-war and wartime assumptions.

Wartime social life offered much to detective writers. Plots accordingly about false identities and the resulting murders, were used by Christie in postwar novels: in *Taken at the Flood* (1948), deaths in a wartime bomb blast launch the plot about false identities. A false identity is also significant with the villain in *Dead Man’s Folly* (1956), who, in the event, is a deserter, and not a casualty. These themes, however, were not to the fore with the books Christie published during the war. Moreover, the characters do not even read war news in the newspapers.

It was classic murder as normality in, for example, *Evil Under the Sun* (1941), *The Body in the Library* (1942), *Five Little Pigs* (1943), and *Towards Zero* (1944). There is no explicit reference to the war in these novels. So also with short stories of the period, although the servant problem is an issue in ‘The Case of the Perfect Maid.’

Evil Under the Sun was set on Smugglers’ Island, in fact Burgh Island off South Devon, where, during the war, the fashionable hotel was both used as a recovery centre for wounded RAF personnel and damaged by a German bomb. To pre-empt German attack from Brittany, anti-tank defences and pillboxes were constructed, as was an observation post.

Far from the war being dominant. *The Body in the Library* (1942) begins with Dolly Bantry dreaming of nothing more surprising than the vicar’s wife wearing a bathing-suit at a flower show. The early-morning household at Gossington Hall includes three housemaids, a cook, a chauffeur, and a butler. There are presumably also gardeners. Arthur Bantry refers to the influence of the genre in responding to Dolly’s news of a body in the library: he sees it as a dream inspired by:

‘that detective story you were reading – *The Clue of the Broken Match*. You know – Lord Edgbaston finds a beautiful blonde dead on the library hearthrug. Bodies are always being found in libraries in books. I’ve never known a case in real life.’

Dolly also refers to this only happening in books. There was no story of that title.

The politics of the book scarcely relate to the war. Dolly Bantry complains that Basil Blake has: ‘that silly slighting way of talking that these boys have nowadays – sneering at people sticking up for their school or the Empire or that sort of thing.’ Arthur Bantry, an ex-Colonel, county councillor, member of the Conservative Association, active churchman and loyal husband, loathes Basil, a London member of the film industry. At the end, however, there is both a mention of the war and a wartime reconciliation: Bantry refers disparagingly to Blake as dishonest and, as a member of the younger generation, having no stamina, but Marple responds:

‘Some of them have been through a bad time.... He did A.R.P. [Air Raid Precautions] work, you know, when he was only eighteen. He went into a burning house and brought out four children, one after another. He went back for a dog, although they told him it wasn’t safe. The building fell in on him. They got him out, but his chest was badly crushed and he had to lie in plaster for nearly a year and was ill for a long time after that.... He doesn’t talk about it.’

Bantry replies ‘quite right. Proper spirit.... Always thought he’d shirked the war.’ Marple’s description is that of the London Blitz and this is the only reference to the war in the novel.

Five Little Pigs (1943), a Poirot story about sexual tension and jealousy, is a powerful work that offers little hint of the wartime background, for author or reader. Nor is there any real engagement with social developments. Looking back, the elderly Caleb Jonathan comments: ‘... all the young people were a disappointment to their parents. None of them ran true to type – huntin’,

shootin', fishin', ' but without any more general reflection. The disruption of the previous world war is captured – 'Diana married a fellow who wasn't a gentleman – one of the temporary officers in the war,' of which there were many, including Hastings. There are no reflections on the current one. So also with many novels by other detective writers, such as Sebastian Farr's *Death on the Down Beat* (1941), Patrick Hamilton's *Hangover Square* (1941), Shelley Smith's *Background for Murder* (1942), and Cyril Hare's *Tragedy at Law* (1942). To an extent, a refusal to focus on the war was an aspect of a phlegmatic and fatalistic response, and, more particularly, a stoical emphasis on keeping going whatever the Germans threw at Britain.

The *Moving Finger* (1943) has its protagonist, Jerry Burton, also recovering, in this case from an aircraft crash, but that reference to the war is not developed. Indeed, we are taken away from the war when Joanna Burton suggest to Emily Barton that she go on a cruise, which was scarcely possible in wartime. Instead, anonymous letters and an erring husband are the means and cause of the murder. The exigencies of wartime play no role, but there is a continuance of the pre-war theme of the financial pressures on the genteel. The angry former parlour-maid, Florence, complains on behalf of Emily, who had been forced to let her house:

“Forced to it. And she living so frugal and careful. But even then, the government can't leave her alone! Has to have its pound of flesh just the same... Shares not bringing in what they used to, so she says, and why not, I should like to know?” “Practically everyone has been hit that way,” I said.’

In one reversal of Christie's previous approach, the elderly Emily is not followed up in her brief criticism: ““The schoolmistress here is a most unpleasant young woman. Quite *Red*, I'm afraid.””

Sparkling Cyanide was another wartime novel, in this case the development of the July 1937 short story 'Yellow Iris.' First published in the United States in February 1945, although there under the title *Remembered Death*, the novel offers us only an elliptical view of the war, in the shape of the challenge posed over the last three years by a gang of international saboteurs run from Central Europe who had been gathering secrets, agitating among workmen and targeting, among others, the tank trials at Lord Dewsbury's works, other prominent British armaments manufacturers, as well as the Ericson aircraft manufacturers in the United States. Unusually for Christie, this activity is repeated twice in the novel, presumably in an attempt to establish the threat.

As in earlier novels, the British can rely in *Sparkling Cyanide* on Colonel (Johnny) Race, who had once controlled the Counter-Espionage Department, and is referred to as 'the Empire builder type,' and later as 'soldierly.' Race passes muster with the difficult General Lord Woodworth as they had both been at Badderpore in India in 1923, while Empire is again the signifier when Race remembers Mary Rees-Talbot from Allahabad, also in India. Another still-active part of the old Britain is Lord Kidderminster, a key Conservative statesman. He has influence that spans the country, being for example a friend of the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, but does not expect the

law to overlook his daughter if a murderess. That theme, of no fear or favour, is also offered by Chief Inspector Kemp and is presented as part of Englishness.

Kidderminster's son-in-law, Stephen Farraday, an MP and a coming-man, is a far more troubling figure. Believing in 'the Will,' which is twice capitalised, Farraday benefited from the profit his father made by constructing 'a row of jerry-built houses,' which is a reference both to what happened and also to the salience of housing as an issue. By predilection a Liberal, Farraday realised that Party was dead, and joined Labour, where he did well, only to be thwarted by its lack of openness to new ideas. This is Christie commenting as a Conservative, for reality was otherwise. As a result, Farraday had joined the Conservatives, who were looking for promising young men, contested and won a fairly solid Labour constituency, presumably in 1931 or 1935, and set about marrying into the Kidderminsters, which greatly helped his rise. This is a somewhat unproblematic account of Conservative politics.

In *Towards Zero* (1944), the hero Angus MacWhirter, is introduced in hospital, but as a result of a failed suicide attempt, and not as a battle casualty. This is not a story about the war. Englishness is defined as being good at sport, although the sportsman is the murderous villain. This is the last of five cases with the sensible, well-moustachioed Superintendent Battle.

Poirot does not follow earlier adventures, notably 'The Missing Prime Minister' and *The Big Four*, in opposing international conspiracy. Christie in *N or M?* (1941), in contrast to forgetting war, has, instead, a wartime thriller that provides Tommy and Tuppence with new relevance, as they had not appeared since *Partners in Crime* (1929). *N or M?* resets Tommy and Tuppence into the new world war as never happened with Poirot or Marple. The war cuts in on the first page of the novel, set in the spring of 1940, with the Germans advancing in France. The plot focuses on the hunt for two murderous top German spies hiding out in Leahampton, in fact Bournemouth. An abridged version was published in *Woman's Pictorial* in April-June 1941 before the November book. Tommy Beresford is given an account of the dire state of the country by Grant, his Secret Service recruiter. Like Race, Grant is another older figure of authority:

“This war started in an optimistic spirit. Oh, I don't mean the people who really knew – we've known all along what we were up against – the efficiency of the enemy, his aerial strength, his deadly determination, and the co-ordination of his well-planned war machine. I mean the people as a whole. The good-hearted, muddle-headed democratic fellow who believes what he wants to believe – that Germany will crack up, that she's on the verge of revolution, that her weapons of war are made of tin and that her men are so underfed that they'll fall down if they try to march – all that sort of stuff. Wishful thinking as the saying goes.

Well the war didn't go that way. It started badly and it went on worse. The men were all right – the men on the battleships and in the planes and in the dug-outs. But there was mismanagement and unpreparedness – the defects, perhaps, of our qualities. We don't want war, haven't considered it

seriously, weren't good at preparing for it.

The worst of that is over. We've corrected our mistakes, we're slowly getting the right men in the right place. We're beginning to run the war as it should be run – and we can win the war – make no mistake about that – but only if we don't lose it first. And the danger of losing it comes, not from outside – not from the might of Germany's bombers, not from her seizure of neutral countries and fresh vantage points, from which to attack – but from within. Our danger is the danger of Troy – the wooden horse within our walls ... Men and women, obscure, but all believing genuinely in the Nazi aims and the Nazi creed and desiring to substitute that sternly efficient creed for the muddled easy-going liberty of our democratic institutions.”

Subsequently, the German plan is discussed by Commander Haydock, a retired naval officer. It is for a 'new Britain,' with self-seeking people replaced by 'brave and resourceful' leaders: 'Between us all we will create a new Europe – a Europe of peace and progress.' The Germans had gained full details of British military dispositions, and a list of those pledged to assist the invasion included:

‘two Chief Constables, an Air Vice-Marshal, two Generals, the Head of an Armaments Works, a Cabinet Minister, many Police Superintendents, Commanders of Local Volunteer Defence Organisations, and various military and naval lesser fry, as well as members of our own Intelligence Force ... These people were ready to betray their country not for money, but in a kind of megalomaniacal pride in what they, *they themselves*, were going to achieve ... It is the Cult of Lucifer.’

This list was far more extensive (and alarmist) than those who did in fact look to Germany. This is a *Thirty-Nine Steps* type of novel, with deceit and subterfuge to the fore. The Lucifer theme helps to provide a moral anchor and looks to other novels in which Christie used it including *Passenger to Frankfurt. N or M?* also provides a basis for a later novel involving Tommy and Tuppence, *Postern of Fate* (1973), in which, returning to *N or M?*, Colonel Atkinson refers to highly-placed wartime traitors, a constant theme of this sort of literature, and to the resulting provision of information to Germany and Italy.

The war cast its shadow in postwar Christie novels, including *Crooked House* (1949) and *Ordeal by Innocence* (1958). It also bound author and readers together in their common morality and sense of purpose, one in which the hubris of murder was a sin that deserved punishment.

More deeply, to Christie and her readers, the war itself was a moral struggle, and thus her stories of killers defying the norms, killing, and being brought to justice, had further weight.

(3165 words)