

Potterne to Hollywood: Balchin's rise to fame

Derek Collett looks at writer Nigel Balchin's county connections.

AT THE height of his fame in the 1940s and 1950s, Nigel Balchin was known for many different things. First and foremost, he was renowned as an exceptionally talented novelist who, as well as producing exciting stories, also wrote with empathy and perception about the human condition: his books had depth as well as pace. Balchin's two best-known novels, *The Small Back Room* and *Mine Own Executioner*, were huge bestsellers and both were adapted for the big screen, the latter by Balchin himself.

Success as a scriptwriter encouraged Balchin to adapt other people's work, and his screenwriting ability was recognised with the award of the 1956 BAFTA for his script for the wartime espionage tale *The Man Who Never Was*. He ended up in Hollywood, where he toiled with decidedly mixed results for several years and was involved in the great cinematic farce that was *Cleopatra*, the four-hour Richard Burton–Elizabeth Taylor epic which at the time was the most expensive film ever made. Balchin later derived great amusement from his claim that he had been responsible for “the first folio edition of *Cleopatra*”.

At the start of the 1930s, before he was lauded as a writer, Balchin was one of a very select band of industrial psychologists in Britain. While working for the chocolate manufacturers

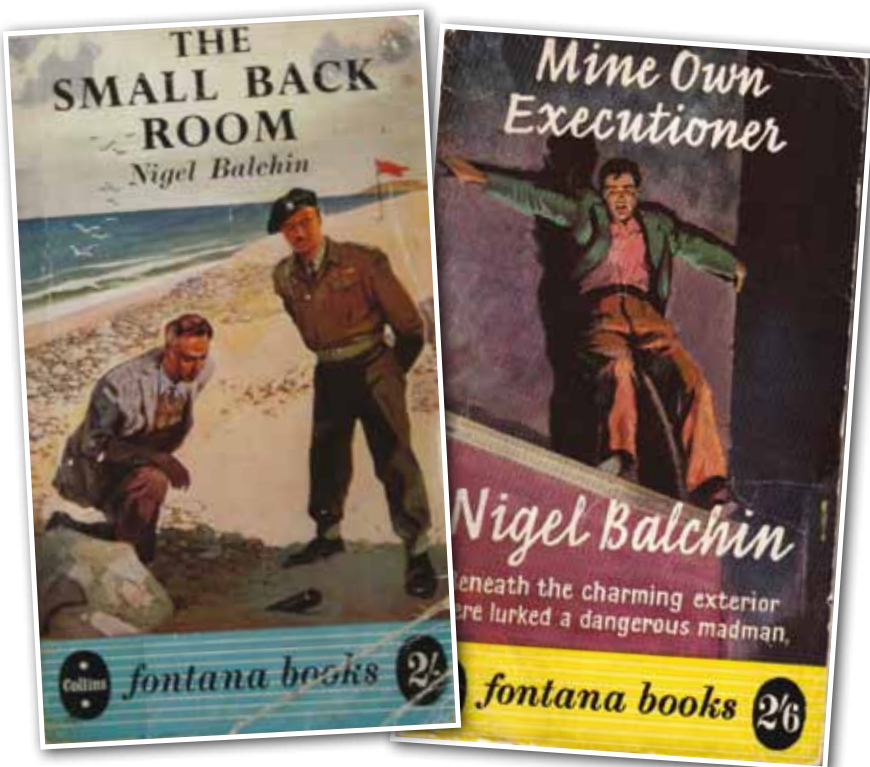


‘*The Small Back Room* novel was a bestseller’

Rowntree's, he devised the instantly recognisable black-and-white box for Black Magic, a classic design which is still going strong nearly 80 years later. He was closely involved in the development of Aero and may have been the man who first suggested bubbling air through chocolate to produce the distinctive texture.

During the Second World War, Balchin worked in food rationing and army personnel selection before transferring to the arena of scientific research. He was made a Brigadier and appointed deputy scientific adviser to the Army Council. Balchin's work as an army boffin helped him write his most famous novel, *The Small Back Room*, which contains one

Above: Balchin in the 1940s; **Left:** Balchin's best-known novels; **Above right:** *The Small Back Room* was turned into a film which set some scenes at Stonehenge; **Below right:** Balchin came up with the distinctive black and white box for Black Magic





‘The director set the weaponry testing scene at Stonehenge’

of the first-ever uses of the phrase “back-room boy”, an expression which is still common parlance today. As a natural public speaker, Balchin also found plenty of work at the BBC, appearing frequently on radio and television throughout his working life and enjoying a degree of celebrity as a result.

A Wiltshire upbringing

Despite Balchin’s numerous achievements, one accolade has eluded him to date: he has not generally been thought of as a famous Wiltshireman. However, he was born and raised in Potterne, about three miles south of Devizes, and lived most of his early life in the county. He entered the world on December 3, 1908 and was baptised Nigel Marlin Balchin in the village church, St Mary the Virgin, on January 10, 1909. Balchin’s father, William Edwin, was a baker and grocer in the village and the Balchin family lived in The Butts, on the northern side of Potterne.

Before the end of the First World War the Balchins had moved to West Lavington, on the edge of Salisbury Plain. Nigel’s father established another bakery business here, and this time the premises also functioned as a tearoom. Nigel soon started at the nearby Dauntsey Agricultural School, then an establishment that provided an agricultural training for farmers’ sons and the male offspring of other manual workers. Another writer with strong Wiltshire connections, the Rev W Awdry of Thomas the Tank Engine fame, partly overlapped with Balchin as a pupil. He described the school as “a rather rough place... with bad language often to be heard.”

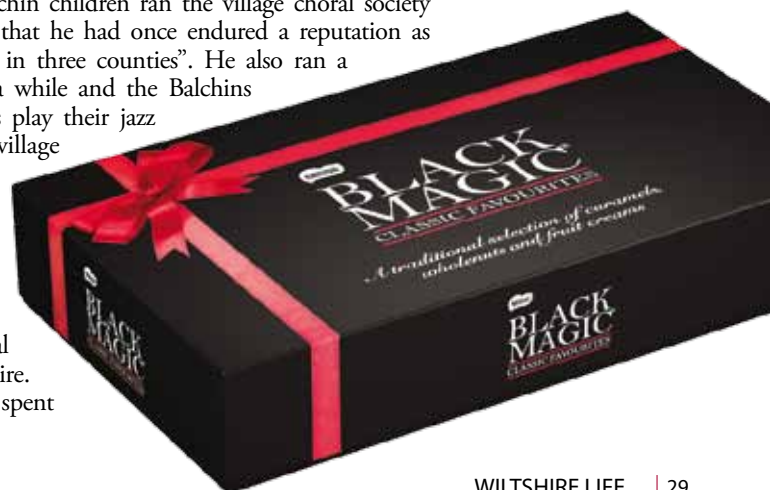
Despite this seemingly unpromising environment, Balchin’s scholastic career was an illustrious one. He was particularly successful on the sports field, playing hockey, cricket, rugby, soccer and fives for the school and captaining

the soccer and cricket sides. He won several prizes, including the elocution prize and the headmaster’s prize, and became captain of the school in his final year. Cultural pursuits were not neglected: Balchin helped to produce the school magazine, was a member of the Dauntsey’s Choral Society and acted in dramatic productions. He excelled in the classroom as well, leaving Dauntsey’s in the summer of 1927 with a Higher School Certificate for natural sciences and a scholarship to Peterhouse, Cambridge.

When not busy at school, Balchin played a full part in the social life of West Lavington, along with the rest of his family. His mother was a stalwart of the Mother’s Union and Women’s Institute and his sister Monica was a long-time member of the church choir. The Balchins were evidently a public-spirited bunch: there are numerous reports in *The Wiltshire Gazette* in the 1920s and 1930s of fetes in aid of the sports club or the church in which the family played a role, helping to run the coconut shy or stalls such as bowling for a pig.

The three Balchin children ran the village choral society and Nigel joked that he had once endured a reputation as “the worst cellist in three counties”. He also ran a dance band for a while and the Balchins would sometimes play their jazz instruments at village concerts.

Having left Cambridge in 1930 with a degree in natural sciences, Balchin enjoyed one final summer in Wiltshire. He seems to have spent



THE SMALL BACK ROOM PHOTO BY EVERETT COLLECTION/REX FEATURES



most of it playing cricket, and all that practice evidently paid off because in August he appeared in a Minor Counties match for Wiltshire against Berkshire, making him one of the best cricketers among the ranks of celebrated novelists.

Evocations of Wiltshire in Balchin's fiction

Balchin's signature novel, 1943's smash-hit *The Small Back Room*, has at least some tangential connections with the Wiltshire of his birth. As a boy, Balchin was exposed to military manoeuvres because of the proximity of West Lavington to the army camps and aerodromes to be found on the vast expanses of the Wiltshire downs around the time of the First World War. Balchin may have had Salisbury Plain in mind when the time came for him to think of an appropriate setting for the weapons trials witnessed by the disabled scientist Sammy Rice in the novel.

Certainly Michael Powell, the maverick film director responsible for the critically acclaimed movie version of *The Small Back Room*, sensed a Wiltshire connection: he chose to set this scene at Stonehenge, presumably so as to appeal to the American audience. An ancient stone circle would not seem to be a very practical location for testing experimental weaponry and I can't imagine that English Heritage would sanction its use for such a purpose today!

The main plot thread of *The Small Back Room* may also have been inspired by Balchin's early experiences of the Wiltshire countryside. In February 1918, *The Wiltshire Gazette* carried a piece written by a Marlborough doctor warning of the perils

Above: During the Second World War, Balchin worked in food rationing, army personnel selection and scientific research

of interfering with live munitions. Small boys had been hitting unexploded bombs with hammers and had been badly injured as a consequence. It was the doctor's belief that the devices had been dropped from aeroplanes as part of military exercises. This is startlingly similar to the situation that occurs in *The Small Back Room* when a young girl picks up a booby-trap bomb dropped by the Luftwaffe and is blown to pieces. It is by no means certain that Balchin saw this particular issue of *The Wiltshire Gazette* as a boy but the parallel is uncanny and it seems unlikely that he didn't either know of this particular incident or else hear of similar ones.

The other main link with Wiltshire in Balchin's fiction occurs in his second novel. *Simple Life*, published in 1935, has been out of print almost ever since and I will not frustrate prospective readers by discussing in detail a book that they will be unlikely to succeed in obtaining. Suffice to say that the novel concerns a young advertising copywriter who escapes the London rat race by hitching a lift in a removal van heading for Cornwall. He gets out in Wiltshire, about seven miles from Salisbury, decides that he likes the greenness of the land and the freshness of the air and spends the rest of the story in and around the fictional village of Leaford St Michael ("on the very edge of Salisbury Plain") living the uncomplicated existence of the book's title.

Balchin once said that "perhaps the strongest formative influence in my early years was Salisbury Plain" and that the area had given him "a love of space and tumbling wind". This affection for the characteristic wide open spaces of Wiltshire is conveyed very strongly in *Simple Life*. Written five years after Balchin had left the West Country, the book bears the following dedication: "To the Society of Wiltshiremen in London this story of a Londoner in Wiltshire is respectfully dedicated".

Return of the prodigal

Balchin returned to Wiltshire only sporadically once he had established himself as a novelist. In a piece written shortly after his death in May 1970, *The Wiltshire Gazette* speculated on the possibility that he might have descended on the county in later life to receive the plaudits the newspaper believed he was rightly entitled to. Although Balchin did enjoy receiving press attention when he arrived in America on a screenwriting assignment, he was generally a person who preferred to shun the limelight and so it is hard to imagine him processing through the streets of Potterne and West Lavington in an open-topped vehicle while an adoring public carpet the route with floral tributes.

Unbeknown apparently to *The Wiltshire Gazette*, Balchin did return to his old stamping ground for a feature he wrote for the *Sunday Times* in 1964. On that occasion he admired the expansion of Dauntsey's School but found that his childhood home in Potterne had been bulldozed to make way for a new housing estate.

I have taken several trips to Wiltshire in recent years on the trail of Nigel Balchin. About the only evidence I have found of his time in the county is a silver plaque on the side of his boyhood home in West Lavington erected by the Old Dauntseians' Association. It seems an inadequate memorial for a highly accomplished writer and a multitasking individual, a man who made a mark on the world and on whom Wiltshire certainly left its mark as well. WL

• For more details about Nigel Balchin visit the website www.nigelmarlinbalchin.com. Derek Collett is currently working on a biography of Balchin; any readers who have information about Balchin's early life in Wiltshire are encouraged to get in touch with him at backroomboy@talktalk.net.