

# Mixing Business with Pleasure – An Evaluation of Nigel Balchin’s Twin Careers as Industrial Psychologist and Writer

**Derek M. Collett**

*Independent researcher*

## **Abstract**

*The novelist and screenwriter Nigel Balchin (1908–1970) was originally employed as an industrial investigator by the National Institute of Industrial Psychology between 1930 and 1935. His early writing was largely comic, satirizing his work as a psychologist, although his job also provided him with some of the material for his first two novels. He is remembered today as the author of best-sellers such as *The Small Back Room* and *Mine Own Executioner*, both of which were made into critically acclaimed films. This paper describes Balchin’s varied career and looks at the way in which his early experience as a psychologist continued to influence his writing for much of the rest of his life.*

## **Early life: Wiltshire, Cambridge and the National Institute of Industrial Psychology**

Nigel Balchin was born in Potterne, Wiltshire on 3 December 1908 (Rowland, 2004). By the time that the First World War had ended his family had relocated to the nearby village of West Lavington, where Balchin attended the Dauntsey Agricultural School. Balchin’s father was a baker and this would appear to have made Balchin eligible for a Ministry of Agriculture scholarship intended for “The Sons and Daughters of Agricultural Workers”.<sup>1</sup> He was duly awarded such a scholarship and was admitted to Peterhouse, Cambridge in 1927. Balchin began studying for the Natural Sciences Tripos, with some success: he won a prize in his first year examination, was awarded an Exhibition at the end of both his first and second years and was placed in the Second Class in Part I of the Tripos in 1929.

At the end of Balchin’s second year at Cambridge, the Ministry of Agriculture intervened and attempted to direct the remainder of his university education. As his scholarship was intended to train agricultural scientists, the Ministry wanted Balchin to take Part II of the Natural Sciences Tripos *and* a Diploma in Agriculture, a course of study that would have taken a further two years to complete. Balchin reluctantly complied with the Ministry’s demands and embarked upon their prescribed programme, despite an awareness that studying for the Diploma was a waste of time as he had no intention of following an agricultural vocation once he left Cambridge. Matters came to a head during the second term of Balchin’s third year at Peterhouse when he began to rebel against the Ministry’s instructions. After a lengthy wrangle between the student and the Ministry, Balchin got his way: he was released from the agricultural obligations of his scholarship and was free to draw up his own timetable

for his last term at university. One of the subjects he chose was psychology, pursuing a course of study selected for him by Frederic Bartlett, Director of the Psychological Laboratory at Cambridge. It was a felicitous decision that would have far-reaching consequences for the young Balchin: agriculture's loss would prove to be psychology's gain.

In his final term at Cambridge, Balchin was able to combine his new-found love of psychology with his erstwhile interest in agriculture. His experiments on the Cambridge University Farm in May 1930 formed the basis for a paper published in *The Human Factor* two years later (Balchin, 1932). In 'Time Experiments on Hoeing', Balchin showed that agricultural labourers generally worked at a level well below their maximum capacity and that this slacking occurred more as a result of boredom than fatigue. When Balchin offered the men a financial stimulus to work harder, there was an increase of more than 86% in output, with no deterioration in the quality of the men's work. It should be pointed out however that Balchin neglected to mention whether or not the men were observed during this investigation, as the presence of an observer or foreman had made a tremendous difference to the same men's productivity in an earlier experiment reported in the same paper. Balchin concluded optimistically that his study offered "yet further evidence of how much might be hoped from the large-scale application of Industrial Psychology to English agriculture" (Balchin, 1932, p. 12).

Having chosen not to sit the exams for Part II of his Tripos, Balchin took an unusual route to obtain his degree. He received a Certificate of Diligent Study in 1930, confirming that he had undertaken a worthwhile academic programme during his final year in residence at Peterhouse. This Certificate, in addition to his result in Part I of the Tripos, was sufficient for Balchin to be awarded a degree in Natural Sciences in June 1930. The young graduate joined the National Institute of Industrial Psychology (N.I.I.P.) straight from Cambridge,<sup>2</sup> arriving for work at its Aldwych offices on 18 August 1930.<sup>3</sup> The history of the N.I.I.P. has been covered in detail before (see, e.g., Doyle, 1979; Hearnshaw, 1964; Raphael, 1970; Shimmin and Wallis, 1994; Welch and Myers, 1932). Suffice to say here that it was a non-profit-making organization supported by forward-looking companies such as J. S. Rowntree & Co. and, in the 1930s, one of the few major employers of psychologists in the country. The philosophy of the N.I.I.P. was described by Balchin himself as follows: "On the industrial side it seeks to make life easier and more happy for the employee, and in doing so, to benefit at once employee, employer and society in general" (Balchin, 1933a, p. 257).

### **How to run a chocolate factory**

Only two weeks after having arrived at the N.I.I.P., Balchin was dispatched to Rowntree's chocolate factory in York to undertake an investigation that would last more than nine months. He received no salary at first: instead, a living allowance of 7s 6d per day was paid during his six-month training period, which was later increased to be equivalent to half the salary of a trained investigator.<sup>3</sup> Balchin's training would appear to have been almost solely of the on-the-job variety. As a Cambridge graduate he would have been expected to use his initiative and commonsense to determine what needed to be done to improve efficiency in the factory.

Throughout Balchin's employment with the N.I.I.P. the Chairman of Rowntree's was (Benjamin) Seebohm Rowntree. His enthusiasm for progressive business practices is well known and an industrial psychologist, Victor Moorrees, had

been appointed at the Cocoa Works in York as early as 1922, the first such appointment in the country (Bunn, 2001). Rowntree was one of the founding members of the N.I.I.P., remained on its Executive Committee until 1949 and served as Chairman between the years 1940 and 1947 (Harrison, 2004). His writings on the subject of industrial welfare include books such as *The Human Factor in Business* (Rowntree, 1921).

Balchin made an immediate impact at Rowntree's. Less than three months after arriving in York he wrote to his old Peterhouse tutor to tell him that "I came here originally to watch another man getting results but I became interested in the packing, and as I had the luck to bring a new method off, my companion very sportingly offered to turn the work over to me."<sup>4</sup> Balchin's 'luck' also turned out to be very lucky indeed for Rowntree's: by eliminating wasted chocolate, the new packing method contrived to save them something in the vicinity of £4000 per year.<sup>5</sup> Balchin stayed at Rowntree's well into 1931, continuing to develop improved packing methods and establishing the superiority of hand packing over conveyor packing.

After these early successes, Balchin returned to the N.I.I.P.'s London headquarters. Having completed his training and a subsequent six-month probation period, he was confirmed on the permanent staff of the N.I.I.P. on 18 August 1931 with a starting salary of £396 per annum.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of the following year Balchin travelled widely across Britain, carrying out a clutch of investigations for a number of different companies.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the young investigator had acquired a sweet tooth whilst at Rowntree's, because he was seconded to another chocolate manufacturer and to a maker of custard powder and jellies, as well as the corn flour purveyors Brown & Polson. For variety, Balchin also overhauled the procedures of a photographic firm. The investigations carried out during this period (1931–2) mainly concerned factory organization, i.e. redesigning or optimizing layouts, improving transport procedures and introducing mechanized packing routines. However, Balchin also diversified into areas such as aptitude tests for selecting personnel, advertising and sales, as well as turning his attention to difficulties such as time-wasting, poor morale, organizational slackness and friction between employees.

According to Winifred Raphael (a stalwart of the Institute for almost forty years), the 1930s was for the N.I.I.P. "possibly the decade when it was richest in talent" (Raphael, 1970, p. 64). In addition to Raphael herself, the talented batch of industrial investigators that Balchin was a part of in the 1930s included a future President of the British Psychological Society (Leslie Hearnshaw<sup>7</sup>) and a future President of the Institute of Personnel Management (Bernard Ungerson<sup>8</sup>). Despite the presence of so many other high-achievers, Balchin evidently made a very favourable impression on his superiors at the N.I.I.P. Within three years of joining the Institute he was reporting to its Investigations Subcommittee<sup>9</sup> and his good work was rewarded with regular bonus payments.<sup>10</sup>

### **"Every colour but black": The triumph of Black Magic**

Nigel Balchin's time at the N.I.I.P. culminated in an investigation that lasted over two and a half years and involved a total of thirteen investigators.<sup>6</sup> Perennially short of funds, in the mid-1930s the Institute accepted an opportunity from Rowntree's to branch out into the field of market research. As the first part of this lengthy investigation, Balchin was assigned the task of designing and marketing a brand new plain chocolate assortment that can still be found on the shelves of our supermarkets today. It came to be known as Black Magic and helped to revive the fortunes of

Rowntree's at a time when its market share was being dwarfed by that of its competitor Cadbury's. The story of Black Magic has been told on several previous occasions. The original account was given in Rowntree's in-house journal *The Cocoa Works Magazine*;<sup>11</sup> more recent publications by Fitzgerald (1995) and by Bunn (2001) represent more accessible sources of information. As well as describing how Rowntree's and the N.I.I.P. collaborated to ensure the successful launch of Black Magic, Fitzgerald's book also describes in great detail the role played by marketing and advertising over the course of Rowntree's long history, and especially how clever exploitation of these disciplines helped to revitalize the company in the 1930s.

Balchin coordinated the market research for Black Magic (Miles, 1950; Rayfield, 1996). He formulated a panel of 7000 people in seven cities across the length and breadth of Britain.<sup>11</sup> These consumers were asked a total of sixteen questions in order to establish their idea of the perfect chocolate assortment. The huge job of analysing the results of the questionnaires was simplified by using punched-card 'Hollerith' machines (Frisby, 1970). The survey, which took six months to complete, established that chocolates were bought primarily by men, but that most men were buying them as presents for women. Men preferred chocolates with hard centres; women were keener on creams. Findings such as these had ramifications when it came to determining the price of the assortment, the composition of the chocolates and the design of the box.

Rowntree's were keen to economize on the packaging of Black Magic and to use the money saved to optimize the quality of the chocolates. Realizing that when he looked into a confectioner's window he saw "Every colour but black" (Rayfield, 1996, p. 55), Balchin chose to depart from contemporary ideas about confectionery packaging as exemplified by the present-day pejorative term 'chocolate box'. J. Walter Thompson had landed the Rowntree's account in 1931 and Balchin's idea was realized by the advertising agency's Packaging Department: they created a plain black box decorated with white lines visible from any angle that would ensure that the new product would stand out from the competition. In the words of Raphael (1970, p. 64), whilst Balchin developed his idea "The walls of the Institute were lined with boxes of chocolates like the witch's cottage in the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale." Despite having undergone a makeover in recent years, the Black Magic box is still recognizable in 2009 as essentially the same one that Balchin designed in the 1930s.

Balchin continued to work for Rowntree's for another two years after the successful launch of Black Magic in January 1933, performing extensive consumer tests on gums, pastilles, fudge, table jellies and milk chocolate.<sup>6</sup> However, this sort of commercially sensitive market research was soon halted, largely because competitors of Rowntree's such as Cadbury's who were also supporting the N.I.I.P. financially were becoming increasingly frustrated at receiving so little in return for their investment (c.f. Bunn, 2001). Possibly disillusioned that the market research at which he had shone was to be discontinued, Balchin decided to resign from the N.I.I.P.<sup>12</sup> He was promptly invited to join the permanent staff of Rowntree's, unless his N.I.I.P. employers made him an improved offer to stay with them. No such increase in Balchin's salary was forthcoming, probably because the N.I.I.P. could not afford to match the figure that Balchin could attract from a commercial employer such as Rowntree's. Balchin's resignation was therefore accepted by the Executive Committee of the N.I.I.P. on 8 February 1935.<sup>12</sup> For the N.I.I.P., loss of industrial investigators in this way was a common problem. At the same meeting at which Balchin's resignation was accepted, the Executive Committee gave consideration to a proposal to debar companies from employing investigators until two years had lapsed

after completion of an investigation.<sup>12</sup> The proposal was defeated but the ‘poaching’ of N.I.I.P. staff was an issue that would continue to exercise the members of the Executive Committee in subsequent years.

According to Balchin, having left the N.I.I.P. he then became “Assistant to Chairman of the Rowntree Group of Companies”, i.e. Seebohm Rowntree.<sup>13</sup> Balchin continued his consumer tests for Rowntree’s, working amongst other things on a new air-filled chocolate bar called Aero.<sup>14</sup> In the words of Raphael, the N.I.I.P.’s management were “furious” when Balchin left as he was seen as one of their brightest stars and as someone who might well have gone on to become a Director of the Institute in the years to come.<sup>15</sup> When Balchin left the N.I.I.P. he was earning £570 a year,<sup>12</sup> a goodly sum at the time for a twenty-six year-old with no psychology qualifications! In subsequent years, as the Institute’s financial problems intensified, many of its staff were forced to take pay cuts. Balchin had perhaps become an asset that the organization could no longer afford to retain.

### Early scientific papers

During Balchin’s time with the N.I.I.P. he wrote a total of eight papers for the Institute’s journal (Balchin, 1931; 1932; 1933ab; 1934a–c; 1935a) which impinged on most of the areas in which he had been active, such as time-wasting, market research, packaging, and sales and production. The first article to be published, ‘Movement Study in Packing’ (Balchin, 1931), suggested that young women assigned the task of filling a box of chocolates worked more efficiently when they were allowed to adopt one of two methods for which they were psychologically and physiologically best-suited, rather than having the theoretically ‘better’ method imposed on them. Raphael (1970, p. 67) claimed that one of the N.I.I.P.’s problems was its shyness of publicity, which contributed to its lack of money: “Few of its staff were good at speaking or writing about its work.” Balchin can certainly be excluded from this criticism as he did much to publicize the Institute by writing articles about its achievements and delivering lectures. Some of the papers mentioned above were transcripts of these lectures (Balchin, 1933ab; 1934a) and thus were written in a very accessible, light-hearted style. However, the humorous tone never succeeded in disguising the author’s serious intent. For example, in his paper ‘The Psychological Difficulties of the Institute’s Work’ (Balchin, 1933a, p. 261) he describes an encounter with an old-school director plainly affronted by Balchin’s attempts to make life easier for his workers:

“You people will be wanting me to give ’em cushions to sit on next.” We pointed out that there was nothing intrinsically absurd in that. A man might work better sitting on a cushion. His reply was worth recording—“I don’t care if he would. I pay a man to come here to work, not to have a good time. In my day we *worked*—twelve hours a day, standing up.”

In his day they worked—twelve hours a day standing up. No matter how much they produced—no matter how tired they were—no matter how bad and foolish and unnecessary it was—that was how they did it. And quite probably he felt that, in some queer way, the fact that it was unpleasant and uncomfortable was somehow connected with his own success. Firmly fixed in his mind was the idea of work as something unpleasant and exhausting. And anything which made it less so must lower efficiency. This attitude is rare nowadays. We wish it were non-existent.

## The Second World War and its aftermath

When war broke out in September 1939, Balchin gave up his job at Rowntree's and went to work for the Ministry of Food. What he actually did there is shrouded in mystery: papers seen by the author at the National Archives<sup>16</sup> suggest that he acted as liaison man for the Federation of Food Manufacturers and the Manufacturing Confectioners' Alliance and as such may have functioned as Rowntree's 'insider' at the Ministry; Balchin himself later claimed to have spent the period between September 1939 and May 1941 "in charge of the allocation of raw materials in the Ministry of Food".<sup>13</sup> What is clear is that he was subsequently recruited by the War Office to join a new department called the Directorate of Selection of Personnel



**Nigel Balchin photographed during his wartime Army service. Thanks to Yovanka Balchin, Nigel's widow, for permission to reproduce this image.**

(D.S.P.). Arriving in Whitehall in August 1941, he joined a strong team including former N.I.I.P. employees such as Ungerson and Edith Mercer.<sup>17</sup> Wartime

Army personnel selection has been covered in detail elsewhere (see, e.g., Shimmin and Wallis, 1994; Tuck, 1946; Ungerson, 1953; Vernon & Parry, 1949) and a good general introduction to the work of D.S.P. has been given by Anstey (1989).

Lack of suitable manpower had been a serious problem for the Army since the early days of the War. In the absence of a method for matching new recruits to suitable forms of employment, there was a great deal of wastage of both time and effort. The end result was a lack of suitable fighting personnel. D.S.P. was inaugurated in an attempt to address these problems. The first duty was to analyse the entire spectrum of Army jobs, establish what standards of intelligence and aptitude were required to perform them and then to classify the various tasks. This job analysis was performed by Balchin and Ungerson and resulted in each task being classified into one of seven categories.

What was then needed was a way to reconcile the Army's manpower requirements with the skills and experiences of the men at its disposal. This was apparently the trickiest part of the entire process (Tuck, 1946). According to a fellow D.S.P. member (Anstey, 1989), Balchin's solution was to put information about the recruits onto Hollerith cards—the same type of punched cards that he had used several years earlier for analysing the Black Magic questionnaires—which were then sorted automatically. Despite encountering stiff opposition from experts in punched-card sorting and allocation who condemned the scheme as "unworkable",<sup>18</sup> Balchin got his way and convinced his Army superiors that they should adopt his method. This automation of the assignment process was vitally important when it is considered that upwards of 12 000 men a fortnight were presenting themselves for primary training during the first year of operation of the D.S.P. scheme (Tuck, 1946).

Balchin also played a role in helping to establish a battery of selection tests (some of them originating from the N.I.I.P.) for new Army recruits, which comprised a mixture of questionnaires, aptitude tests and personal interviews. Perhaps the most notable accomplishment of D.S.P. was the introduction, in the summer of 1942, of the War Office Selection Boards, which served as the template for the post-war Civil Service Selection Boards. Looking back on the successes of D.S.P. many years later, Anstey (1989, p. 478) claimed that the Directorate “made a substantial contribution to the efficiency and morale in the Army”.

By the end of 1942, it was decided that Balchin’s particular skills could best be utilized in a research setting. He was thus attached to the Directorate of Biological Research at the War Office. His work in this capacity encompassed activities such as time-and-motion studies of gun drills, the design of questionnaires for use in obtaining information from battle fronts and a study of accidents suffered by Army vehicles.<sup>13</sup>

On the day before VE Day, Balchin was promoted to be Deputy Scientific Adviser to the Army Council, with the rank of Brigadier. One of his roles in this job was to write a report describing the Army’s use of psychological warfare during the conflict.<sup>19</sup> Balchin described how fear of a particular enemy weapon was determined far more by its perceived psychological impact than by its actual physical effectiveness. Aspects of psychological warfare such as propaganda and the maintenance of morale had been addressed to some extent by the Army but in other areas it was lagging behind. On page 10 of his report, Balchin delivered his damning verdict on the lack of deployment of psychologists by his employers:

It is startling to find that, at a time when it is widely accepted that the effects of both artillery and air-bombing are usually far more psychological than physical, there is no single officer or man solely concerned with the psychological effects of weapons, or the study of battle morale; though hundreds are employed in studying and improving the lethal and physical properties of these weapons.

After 1945, Balchin’s career took a very different course. Two novels (*The Small Back Room* and *Mine Own Executioner*) that he had written during the conflict had been huge popular successes (Balchin, 1943; 1945). Once he was demobilized, Balchin decided to devote virtually all of his time to writing. His acumen regarding the psychological element of advertising was still in demand however, and he served as a consultant to both Rowntree’s and J. Walter Thompson for several years after the War.

## **Incentives**

In the immediate post-war period, another issue that occupied a lot of Balchin’s time was the matter of incentives. The need to increase industrial production was a major preoccupation in ‘Austerity Britain’ and Balchin applied his intellect to the problem by writing (see, e.g., Balchin, 1948a), lecturing and even broadcasting<sup>20</sup> on the subject. The finest crystallization of his ideas is to be found in his paper ‘Satisfactions in Work’ (Balchin, 1947), a theoretical article arising from the author’s experiences with the N.I.I.P. and his later employment as a business consultant. Balchin suggested that the best way to encourage people to work harder was to abolish traditional boundaries between work and pleasure, so that individuals would work harder because they enjoyed doing so and not because they had to. This could perhaps be done, he said, by

introducing more variety within occupations, organizing competitions between workers and attempting to inject excitement and emotion into the working environment by using brightly coloured clothing and opposite-sex supervisors, for example. Such was the radical and far-reaching nature of Balchin's proposals that a contemporary commentator (Ford, 1993) noted that it was only in the 1980s that some of his ideas started to become reality.

Balchin's innovative approach to incentives drew plaudits from the psychological community but it also brought him into conflict with his old mentor Frederic Bartlett, one of the members of the Executive Committee of the N.I.I.P. In late 1946, the Committee's Chairman, Seebom Rowntree, approached Balchin to seek his advice on how the Institute could increase its visibility.<sup>21</sup> Balchin suggested that they should commission a large-scale piece of research into the subject of incentives, thus taking a lead on this issue. Bartlett disagreed, convinced that what was needed instead was a study of unpopular industries with the aim of discovering how to make them less unpopular. Balchin was evidently highly annoyed by the manner in which his proposal was dismissed. He felt that ad hoc investigations such as that proposed by Bartlett had been the bane of the N.I.I.P. in the past and that by refusing to tackle a big task such as the matter of incentives the Institute was denying itself the chance to become the leading authority on the subject.

Although Balchin spoke of trying to find another post as an industrial psychologist as late as 1961,<sup>22</sup> this desire came to nothing and in the later years of his life psychology featured almost exclusively as a source of material for novels and films rather than providing him with permanent employment. Right up until his death in 1970, at the age of sixty-one, Nigel Balchin can be said in some senses to have remained a psychologist (albeit an unpaid one), because he was continually fascinated by people, especially their motivations and torments, and most of his written work reflects his abiding interest in human psychology.

### **Psychological content of Balchin's books**

It did not take long for Balchin to realize that in addition to producing journal articles and lectures about his work, his job as an industrial investigator could also provide him with scope for more creative forms of writing. *How to Run a Bassoon Factory; or Business Explained* (Spade, 1934), arguably Balchin's greatest written contribution to the field of industrial psychology, was published pseudonymously. This book, an expanded version of a series of articles that had originally appeared in *Punch*,<sup>23</sup> was issued at the end of 1934 under the name Mark Spade. Effectively a satire on factory management (with particular reference to industrial psychology), the author chose not to antagonize his employers by putting his real name to the work: "I had to use a pen name because it wouldn't have done for me to reveal that I found anything funny about business life."<sup>24</sup> It is easy to see why: with chapters devoted to 'Motion Study', 'Market Research', 'Incentives' and 'Advertising', Balchin was clearly intent on poking fun at his day job. This extract from the chapter on 'The Psychology of the Worker' (Spade, 1934, p. 63) will serve to give a flavour of the book:

In every factory there are sources of friction which the psychologist can eliminate. I do not, of course, refer to things like emery wheels, which are useful and necessary. I refer rather to those occasions when People Hit Other People With Hammers. This sort of thing wastes time, lowers output, damages implements, and causes bad feeling.



Despite its flippant tone, *How to Run a Bassoon Factory* contained a great deal of sound commonsense and in fact some of the material had already appeared in a more serious guise in Balchin's journal articles. One can perhaps gain an insight into the actual working routines of a 1930s N.I.I.P. investigator by studying the book. *How to Run a Bassoon Factory* sold steadily over a long period of time and a sequel, *Business for Pleasure*, which dealt more with general business methods as opposed to the running of a hypothetical factory, followed a year later (Spade, 1935). The material contained in this book had also appeared previously in *Punch*.<sup>25</sup>

Balchin's debut novel, *No Sky* (Balchin, 1934d), was written midway through his tenure with the N.I.I.P. The book tells the story of a young Cambridge graduate who obtains a post in the rate-setting department of a large engineering firm and is thus likely to have been based at least partly on the author's own experiences. The travails of the time-and-motion man represented an extremely unusual subject for the fiction of the time and *No Sky* was Balchin's first assault on a territory—the world of work—that he would later come to make his own. The opening chapters of his second novel *Simple Life* (Balchin, 1935b) satirized the world of advertising and market research that he had been so closely associated with whilst working on *Black Magic*.

Balchin's big breakthrough as a novelist came during the Second World War. He was lucky to have been placed in working environments where he could obtain highly original material which he could then use as the starting point for his fiction. *Darkness Falls From the Air* (Balchin, 1942) emerged from the author's time at the Ministry of Food and represented a pungent criticism of Civil Service bureaucracy. It was a critical success, but sales were affected by wartime paper rationing (14 000 copies were sold in the hardback edition<sup>26</sup>). Published the following year, *The Small Back Room* also found favour with reviewers and sold in much large quantities (34 000 in hardback<sup>26</sup>). This novel drew on Balchin's scientific research work for the Army during the latter half of the War. The final book in Balchin's wartime 'trilogy', *Mine Own Executioner*, the story of a psycho-analyst who can perform miracles for his patients but is powerless when faced with his own demons, was reputed to have sold 54 000 hardback copies.<sup>26</sup> (It is interesting to speculate about where Balchin obtained the material for *Mine Own Executioner*, given that he would appear to have had no direct experience of psycho-analysis. He did however come into contact with psychiatrists during his wartime work in personnel selection and they may have furnished him with the material he needed to write the book. Balchin later said (Pear, 1967) that *Mine Own Executioner* was based more on his experience of Army psychiatry than on anything he had learned at university.)

Most of the novels that Balchin wrote during his most celebrated period (the 1940s and 1950s) had some sort of psychological element to them. Balchin was always interested in outsiders, in people afflicted with physical or emotional handicaps and in the plight of the individual battling against the establishment, as represented by the Government in novels such as *Darkness Falls From the Air* and *A Sort of Traitors* (Balchin, 1949), the Army in *The Small Back Room* and the psycho-analytical profession in *Mine Own Executioner*.

Two of Balchin's post-war novels were effectively psychological case studies of disturbed individuals. *The Borgia Testament* (Balchin, 1948b) purported to be an 'autobiography' of Cesare Borgia, the fifteenth-century Italian tyrant. The narrative is principally concerned with Cesare's grand plan to create a unified Italy, which involves forging alliances with rival powers, conducting military campaigns and brutally disposing of his opponents. Balchin suggests in conclusion that Borgia was

overly dependent on rationality and that his political failures resulted from his refusal to see the points of view of those who stood in his way and to treat them as human beings. In *The Fall of the Sparrow* (Balchin, 1955), the author examined why a superficially attractive young man, who seemingly had every advantage in life—a good family background, a public school and Oxbridge education and a distinguished war record—should go so far off the rails as to end up in prison for a year for committing a range of minor felonies. Despite not being wholly successful, the book is a brave attempt to unpick a ‘damaged’ person and to try to understand what made them damaged in the first place.

Once Balchin became a full-time writer in the mid-1950s he broadened his range and in general moved away from exploiting the scientific and business themes that had proved so successful for him earlier in his career. However, with his final novel he could be said to have returned to his roots. *Kings of Infinite Space* (Balchin, 1967) describes a Cambridge physiologist undergoing training for an American deep-space mission and includes a depiction of psychological and other selection tests, much like those that Balchin would have administered in the Army and with the N.I.I.P.

A lively and thorough psychological evaluation of Balchin’s novels has been given by the writer and critic Clive James (James, 1974). A full bibliography for Balchin can be found in *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* (Willison, 1972).

### **Writing for the screen: Psychological motifs in Nigel Balchin’s film scripts**

Balchin’s film work clearly reveals the psychologist’s touch. His first produced film script was for the 1947 Boulting Brothers’ film *Fame is the Spur*, an analysis of how a radical Labour politician becomes gradually emasculated once in power. It is perhaps only natural that the subjects of Balchin’s film scripts echo those of some of his novels. Thus there were films about ‘casualties’ such as *Mandy* (1952), a compelling account of an attempt by a dedicated teacher to coax a deaf and dumb girl to speak for the first time, *23 Paces to Baker Street* (1956), a story about a blind playwright who helps the police to foil a murderer, and *Circle of Deception* (1960), in which a soldier with a psychological flaw is specifically chosen for a wartime espionage job so that when he breaks down under torture he will reveal fake military secrets to the Nazis. There were scripts in which the film company utilized Balchin’s knowledge of scientific laboratories or wartime military operations, such as *Malta Story* (1952), *The Man Who Never Was* (for which Balchin won the 1956 BAFTA for Best Screenplay), *Circle of Deception* and *Suspect* (a 1960 adaptation of Balchin’s 1949 novel *A Sort of Traitors*). Finally, a number of films on which Balchin was employed were concerned with moral dilemmas or conflict. These included *Mine Own Executioner* (adapted by Balchin from his novel in 1947), *Suspect* and *The Singer not the Song* (1960), in which John Mills (as a priest) and Dirk Bogarde (as a bandit) battle for control of a Mexican village.

### **Conclusions**

Nigel Balchin’s early work for the N.I.I.P. as an industrial investigator culminated in the launch of Black Magic chocolates by Rowntree’s in 1933. Although in some ways this success helped to precipitate Balchin’s departure from the N.I.I.P., it also showed that industrial psychology could usefully expand to embrace disciplines such as

advertising and market research. When the N.I.I.P. subsequently decided that these disciplines did in fact lie outside its remit, Balchin chose to continue working in these areas for Rowntree's rather than restricting himself to the field of 'traditional' industrial psychology. His work in personnel selection as part of a team in the Second World War led to the introduction of the War Office Selection Boards and, after the War, to the establishment of Civil Service Selection Boards. Balchin's post-war writing on incentives, particularly his paper 'Satisfactions in Work', was an important contribution to the subject and one that still has some relevance today. Finally, Balchin's employment as a psychologist in the 1930s would appear to have had a great influence on him as it provided him with material for several non-fiction books and many of the novels and film scripts he wrote in later life dealt extensively with psychological themes.

### **Postscript: How to buy Balchin's books**

Almost all of Balchin's works are currently out of print. The books that he wrote in the 1930s, including *How to Run a Bassoon Factory*, are very scarce nowadays, although copies do surface periodically on the Internet. Novels from his 1940s heyday (such as *The Small Back Room*) are usually quite easy to find. Later books (1950s onwards) generally had large print runs and thus copies remain relatively plentiful. Amazon<sup>27</sup> and Abebooks<sup>28</sup> are useful websites for tracking down second-hand Balchin books, although charity shops and second-hand bookshops can also be good sources.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>The information in this section concerning Balchin's university career has been derived from numerous communications between the author and Cambridge University. Details of Balchin's scholarship and his change of course during his third year at Cambridge are taken from his personal file held at Peterhouse.

<sup>2</sup>It is probably fair to assume that Bartlett, who at that time was on the Executive Committee of the N.I.I.P., may well have put in a word for his student and helped him to land the job.

<sup>3</sup>Minutes of the Executive Committee of the N.I.I.P. NIIP/2/3. NIIP Archive, LSE, London.

<sup>4</sup>Letter from Balchin to P. C. Vellacott, 16 November 1930. Nigel Balchin's personal file, Peterhouse, Cambridge. Quoted with permission from the Master and Fellows of Peterhouse.

<sup>5</sup>"Annual report for the year 1930." *Journal of the National Institute of Industrial Psychology* 1931;V, 304.

<sup>6</sup>List of projects investigations 1921-1968. NIIP/7/10 and NIIP/11/1. NIIP Archive, LSE, London.

<sup>7</sup>For an obituary, see *The Psychologist* 1991;4, 419.

<sup>8</sup>For a memoir, see Duncan (2001).

<sup>9</sup>Minutes of meetings of the Investigations Sub-Committee of the NIIP (1932-7). NIIP/7/5. NIIP Archive, LSE, London.

<sup>10</sup>Minutes of the Executive Committee of the N.I.I.P. NIIP/2/3 and NIIP/2/4. NIIP Archive, LSE, London.

<sup>11</sup>"Black Magic." *The Cocoa Works Magazine*, Easter 1933. Rowntree Archive, Borthwick Institute, York.

- <sup>12</sup>Minutes of the Executive Committee of the N.I.I.P. NIIP/2/4. NIIP Archive, LSE, London.
- <sup>13</sup>This information is derived from documents in the possession of the author relating to Balchin's Army service.
- <sup>14</sup>R/DT/RM/1 and R/DT/RM/2. Rowntree Archive, Borthwick Institute, York.
- <sup>15</sup>Duncan, D. C. Personal communication, 2008.
- <sup>16</sup>MAF 74/229. The National Archives, London.
- <sup>17</sup>For an account of Edith Mercer's wartime career, see Mercer (1991).
- <sup>18</sup>McMahon, D. "Mr Nigel Balchin: Army years." *The Times*, 26 May 1970.
- <sup>19</sup>Balchin, N. (1945) "Battle Study. Some Aspects of Psychological Warfare." WO 291/2316. The National Archives, London.
- <sup>20</sup>"Incentives. 3. Why work." The Home Service, 18 December 1947.
- <sup>21</sup>BSR 93/VIII/3. Rowntree Archive, Borthwick Institute, York.
- <sup>22</sup>"The return of Nigel Balchin." *The Sunday Times*, 1 October 1961.
- <sup>23</sup>It was serialized in weekly instalments between 7 March and 9 May 1934.
- <sup>24</sup>"Famous writer at the sign of the Greyhound." *East Anglian Daily Times*, 4 February 1969.
- <sup>25</sup>It was serialized in weekly instalments between 14 August and 16 October 1935.
- <sup>26</sup>As quoted by James (1974).
- <sup>27</sup>[www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)
- <sup>28</sup>[www.abebooks.co.uk](http://www.abebooks.co.uk)

## References

- Anstey, E. (1989) Reminiscences of a wartime Army psychologist. *The Psychologist* 2, 475–478.
- Balchin, N. (1931) Movement study in packing. *Journal of the National Institute of Industrial Psychology* V, 274–275.
- Balchin, N. (1932) Time experiments on hoeing. *The Human Factor* VI, 12–25.
- Balchin, N. (1933a) The psychological difficulties of the Institute's work. *The Human Factor* VII, 257–265.
- Balchin, N. (1933b) A psychological approach to market research. *The Human Factor* VII, 375–385.
- Balchin, N. (1934a) On wasting time. *The Human Factor* VIII, 1–15.
- Balchin, N. (1934b) First impressions. *The Human Factor* VIII, 303–308.
- Balchin, N. (1934c) Package appeal. *The Human Factor* VIII, 229–235.
- Balchin, N. (1934d) *No Sky*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Balchin, N. (1935a) Sales versus production. *The Human Factor* IX, 8–12.
- Balchin, N. (1935b) *Simple Life*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Balchin, N. (1942) *Darkness Falls From the Air*. London: Collins.
- Balchin, N. (1943) *The Small Back Room*. London: Collins.
- Balchin, N. (1945) *Mine Own Executioner*. London: Collins.
- Balchin, N. (1947) Satisfaction in work. *Occupational Psychology* 21, 125–134.
- Balchin, N. (1948a) The nature of incentives. *The Nineteenth Century and After* CXLIV, 247–254.
- Balchin, N. (1948b) *The Borgia Testament*. London: Collins.
- Balchin, N. (1949) *A Sort of Traitors*. London: Collins.
- Balchin, N. (1955) *The Fall of the Sparrow*. London: Collins.
- Balchin, N. (1967) *Kings of Infinite Space*. London: Collins.
- Bunn, G. (2001) "A flair for organization": Charles Myers and the establishment of psychology in Britain. *History & Philosophy of Psychology* 3, 1–13.

- Doyle, D. C. (1979) *Aspects of the Institutionalisation of British Psychology: The National Institute of Industrial Psychology 1921-1939*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester.
- Duncan, D. (2001) Bernard Ungerson—A memoir. *The Psychologist* 14:125.
- Fitzgerald, R. (1995). *Rowntree and the Marketing Revolution, 1862-1969*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ford, R. G. (1993) Paper of my lifetime: Balchin, N. (1947) “Satisfaction [sic.] in work”. *The Occupational Psychologist* 20, 11–12.
- Frisby, C. B. (1970) The development of industrial psychology at the NIIP. *Occupational Psychology* 44, 35–50.
- Harrison, B. (2004) Rowntree, (Benjamin) Seebohm (1871-1954). *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hearnshaw, L. S. (1964) *A Short History of British Psychology 1846-1946*. London: Methuen.
- James, C. (1974) Prisoners of clarity—1. Nigel Balchin. *The New Review* 1(1), 64–72. Available at [www.clivejames.com/pieces/hercules/Balchin](http://www.clivejames.com/pieces/hercules/Balchin)
- Mercer, E. O. (1991) A woman psychologist at war. *The Psychologist* 4, 413–415.
- Miles, G. H. (1950) An autobiography (conclusion). *Occupational Psychology* 24, 31–39.
- Pear, T. H. (1967) Psychologists’ and novelists’ approaches to personal relations. *Bulletin of the British Psychological Society* 20, 3–17.
- Raphael, W. (1970) NIIP and its staff 1921 to 1961. *Occupational Psychology* 44, 63–70.
- Rayfield, T. (1996) *Fifty in 40: The Unofficial History of JWT London 1945-1995*. Radnage Common: Rayfield Writers.
- Rowland, P. (2004) Balchin, Nigel Marlin (1908–1970). *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rowntree, B. S. (1921) *The Human Factor in Business*. London: Longmans.
- Shimmin, S. & Wallis, D. (1994) *Fifty Years of Occupational Psychology in Britain*. Leicester: British Psychological Society.
- Spade, M. [Nigel Balchin] (1934) *How to Run a Bassoon Factory; or Business Explained*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Spade, M. [Nigel Balchin] (1935) *Business for Pleasure*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Tuck, G. N. (1946) The Army’s use of psychology during the war. *Occupational Psychology* 20, 113–118.
- Ungerson, B. (1953) *The Second World War 1939-1945. Army Personnel Selection*. London: The War Office.
- Vernon, P. E. & Parry, J. B. (1949) *Personnel Selection in the British Forces*. London: University of London Press.
- Welch, H. J. & Myers, C. S. (1932) *Ten Years of Industrial Psychology*. London: Pitman.
- Willison, I. R. (Ed.) (1972) *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature. Volume 4, 1900-1950*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

#### **Address for correspondence**

15 Tanners Court  
 Charlbury  
 Oxfordshire  
 OX7 3RP  
 E-mail: [dmccollett@talktalk.net](mailto:dmccollett@talktalk.net)