

NIGEL BALCHIN

by Derek Collett

On the third of December this year, it will be exactly one hundred years since the novelist Nigel Balchin was born. Balchin achieved great popularity and fame in the 1940s on the back of two terrifically entertaining novels (*Darkness Falls From the Air* and *The Small Back Room*) about the 'back-room boys' of the Second World War and the impressive psychological thriller *Mine Own Executioner*. Last considered in BMC 127 in October 1994, the centenary of his birth provides the perfect opportunity to reassess his eventful writing career.

Nigel Marlin Balchin was born in Potterne, Wiltshire. He was educated at nearby Dauntsey's School and at Peterhouse College, Cambridge, where he read Natural Sciences. Having graduated from Cambridge in 1930, Balchin was taken onto the staff of the National Institute of Industrial Psychology (N.I.I.P.), a pioneering organization that sought to take psychology out of the rarefied atmosphere of the university department and apply it to real-life problems in the workplace. For most of the five years that he was employed by the N.I.I.P., Balchin was seconded to the York-based confectioners J. S. Rowntree & Son. Balchin's impact on the fortunes of Rowntree's, at a time when the company was being routinely hammered in the marketplace by its main competitor Cadburys, was considerable and his legacy still resonates today. As well as playing a pivotal role in the design and mar-

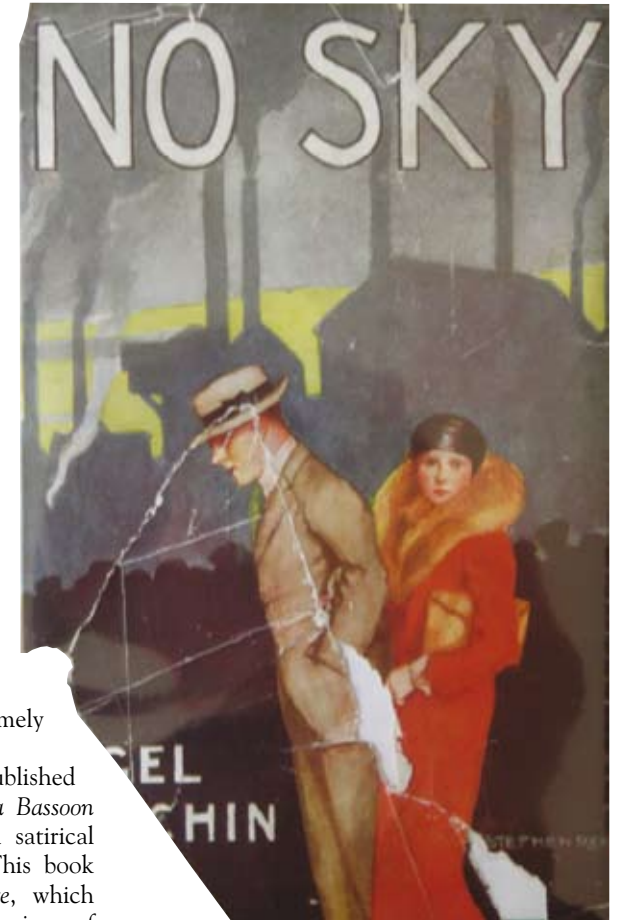


keting of Black Magic chocolates, he performed extensive consumer tests on Aero in the mid-1930s and has even been credited in some quarters with inventing the concept of aerated chocolate.

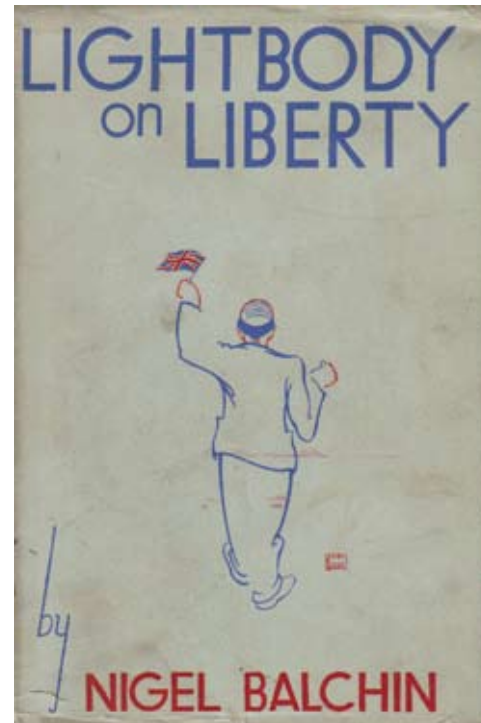
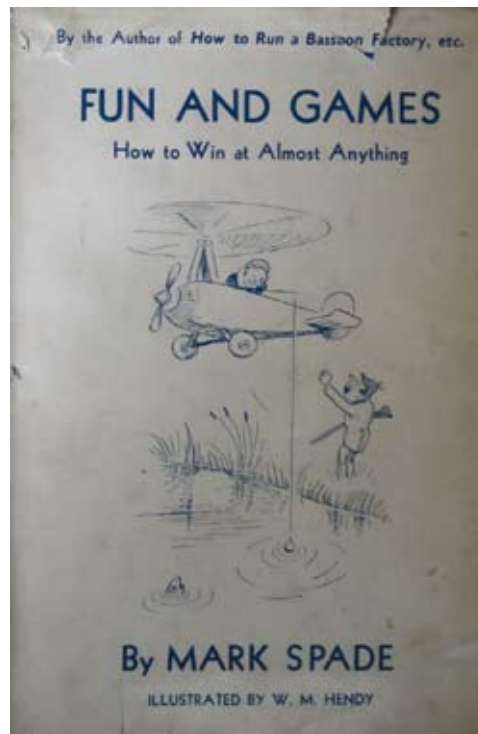
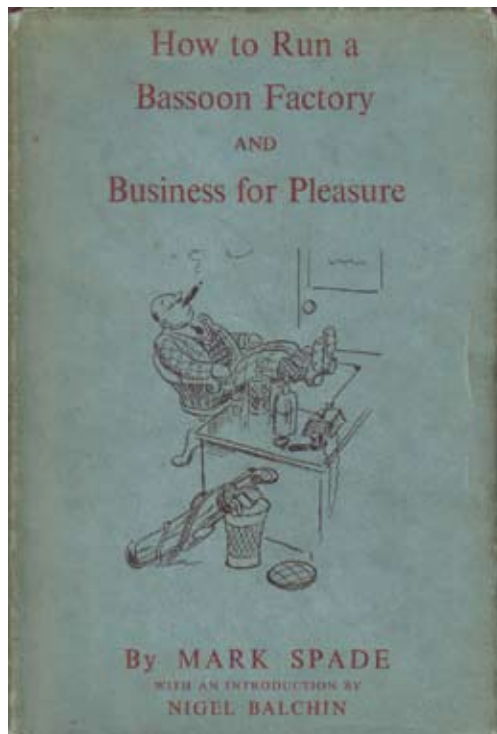
Away from the workplace, family life demanded much of Balchin's time in the 1930s. In 1933 he married Elisabeth Walshe, who had been a fellow student at Cambridge, and their first child was born a year later. The rest of his energies were devoted to establishing himself as a writer. In the autumn of 1934, Balchin's first novel was published by Hamish Hamilton. *No Sky* drew on the author's experiences of working in factories and was a well-written and highly readable book. Although such reviews as it received were very favourable, *No Sky* was not a commercial success. (Speaking many years later, Balchin claimed that it had sold about six hundred copies; certainly the book is extremely hard to find these days.)

A few weeks later, Hamilton published another Balchin title. *How to Run a Bassoon Factory; or Business Explained* was a satirical examination of business methods. This book and its sequel, *Business for Pleasure*, which appeared in 1935, were expanded versions of two sequences of skits that Balchin had originally written for *Punch*. According to their author, both books were still in print and selling well in the late-1960s. The two satires appeared under the pseudonym Mark Spade because, as Balchin explained, "It wouldn't have done for me to reveal that I found anything funny about business life." A combined version of the first two Mark Spade books was issued by Hamilton in 1950 and is easier to find than the original editions of the two volumes.

Nigel Balchin's second novel, *Simple Life*, was published in the spring of 1935. The book was praised by Cyril Connolly among others, but it didn't sell in great quantities and is likely to elude even the most determined collector.

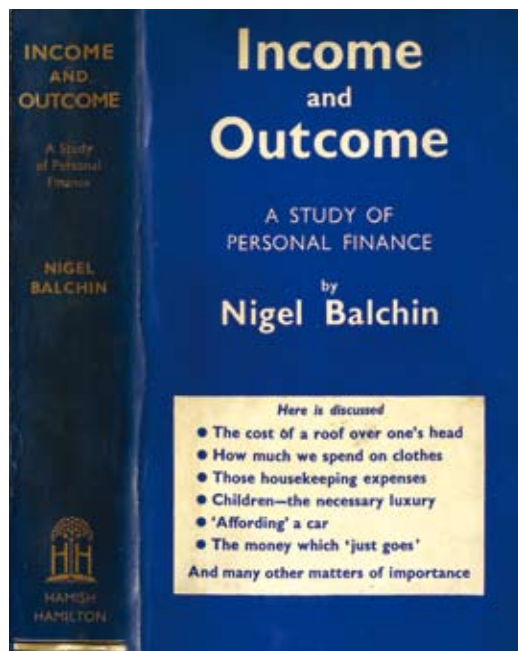


A flurry of activity in 1936 saw Balchin produce three more books. The first of these, *Fun and Games: How to Win at Almost Anything*, was another squib published under the Mark Spade alias, and did for sport what the earlier two books had done for business. (Note that this title is often omitted from lists of Balchin's works and copies are exceptionally difficult to come by.) The second book bore Balchin's own name, the first of his non-fiction works to do so, and was called *Income and Outcome*. This was a relatively serious look at the issue of personal finance and budgeting, albeit one enlivened by a generous sprinkling of humour, with excellent illustrations by Beresford Egan (BMC 256). *Lightbody on Liberty*, the third Balchin novel, had been



of Food, in their Raw Materials Division, Balchin joined the Army. He was involved in personnel selection for just over a year before transferring to the Army's scientific section. On 7 May 1945 (the day before VE Day), this posting culminated in his appointment as Deputy Scientific Adviser to the Army Council, a job that carried with it the rank of Brigadier.

Published in late 1942, *Darkness Falls From the Air*, Balchin's first 'war' novel, represented a massive leap forward in his development as a writer. The author's first three novels, whilst full of interesting ideas and enjoyable to read, had been lacking in drama and at times felt loose and unfocused. Not a word was wasted in *Darkness Falls From the Air*: its terse style, sardonic humour and relentless dynamism immediately marked it out from its predecessors. Set during the Blitz, this pungent satire of British wartime bureaucracy was informed by the writer's time at the Ministry of Food. A young civil servant, Bill Sarratt, fights heroically to get his ideas taken seriously by his superiors in a government department, whilst also coping with his wife's infidelity. The steady night-time fall of

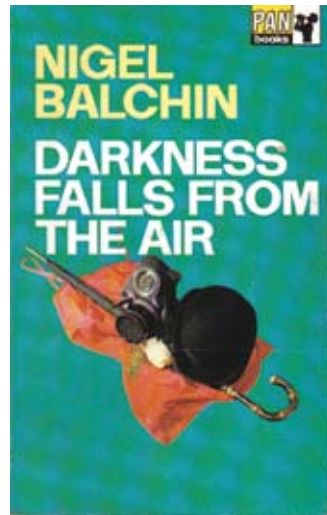
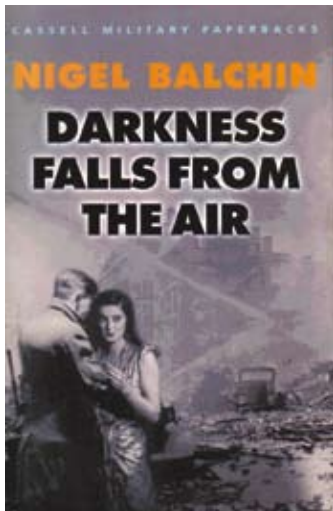


turned down by Hamish Hamilton. Consequently, when it appeared in late 1936 it was under the new imprint of William Collins.

For the next few years, the name of Nigel Balchin made very little impact on the reading public, his published writing in this period comprising mostly unattributed articles for magazines such as *Punch* and *The Aeroplane*. He did however have a number of plays produced professionally, one of which, *Miserable Sinners*, he wrote specifically as a vehicle for James Mason, whom he had met and befriended when the two men were students at Peterhouse.

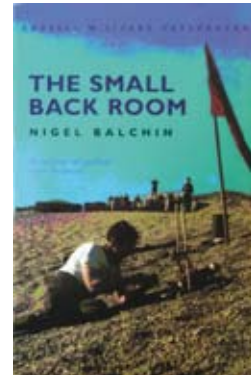
The Second World War proved to be a turning point in Balchin's writing career. His contacts with Rowntree's and the N.I.I.P. helped him to secure a series of interesting 'back-room' posts and he used his wartime experiences as material for the three great novels that made his name and established him as one of the leading contemporary fiction writers. After spending the first two years of the war working for the Ministry





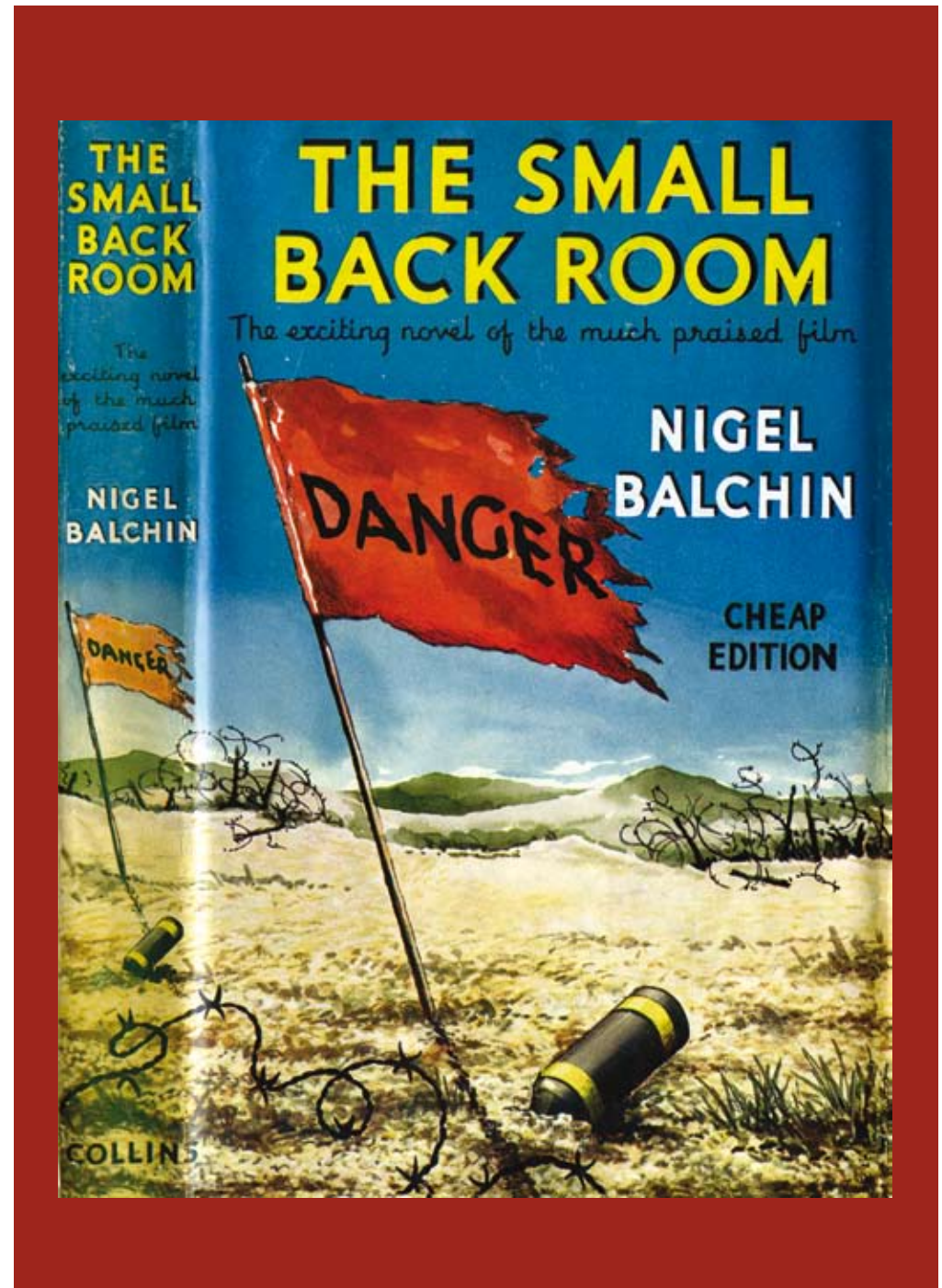
bombs on London provides another layer of interest and gave the book great contemporary relevance. *Darkness Falls From the Air* is littered with vituperative dialogue, much of which is exceedingly funny, and has an exciting and moving climax.

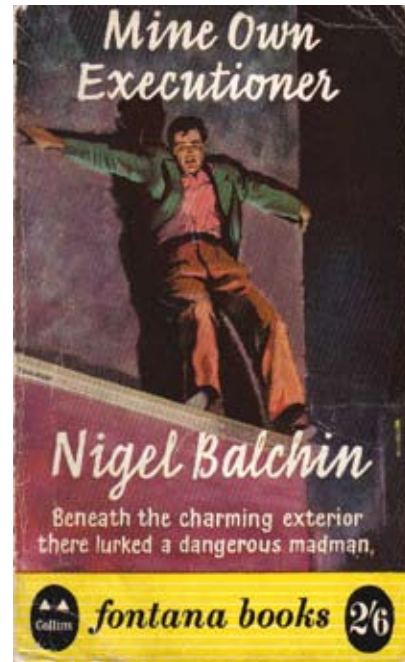
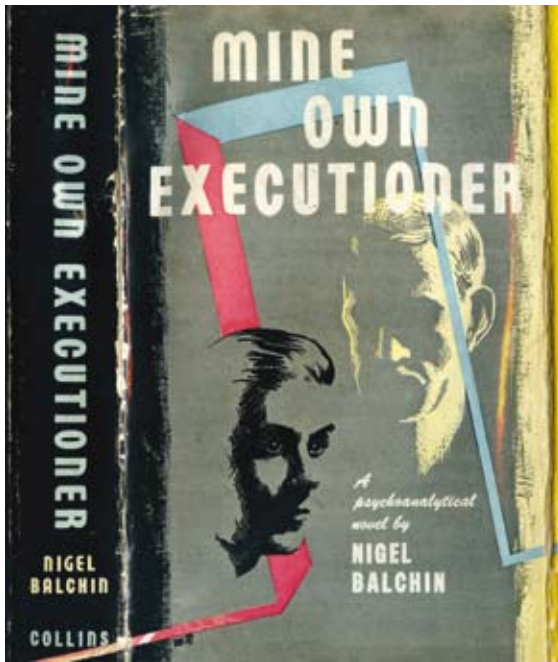
Although enthusiastically reviewed (L. P. Hartley and Elizabeth Bowen were among the book's admirers), sales of *Darkness Falls From the Air* were affected by the wartime paper shortage and first editions are relatively thin on the ground nowadays. By the time that *The Small Back Room* rolled off the printing presses at the end of 1943, Collins had somehow managed to conjure up a large supply of paper and this novel duly gave Balchin his biggest commercial success to date. Today, *The Small Back Room* is probably the best-known Nigel Balchin novel, partly because it was made into a very enjoyable film in 1949 by the team of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (BMC 126). Again set during World War Two, the story concerns a weapons researcher, Sammy Rice, who is called in by the Army to investigate (and ultimately neutralize) a new type of bomb that is being dropped by the Luftwaffe and has a nasty tendency to obliterate any civilian who unwittingly picks it up. The pulsating climax of the novel, wherein Sammy battles both the booby-trap device and his own personal inadequacies, is



utterly captivating and a strong contender for the finest piece of prose that Balchin ever wrote.

Once hostilities had ceased, the demobilized Brigadier chose to build on his wartime fiction triumphs. He spent a couple of days a week working in London and elsewhere on business matters, principally as a freelance adviser to Rowntree's on marketing issues; for the rest of the time he concentrated on his writing. In September 1945, the first post-war Balchin novel appeared. However, this book, *Mine Own Executioner*, was set during the immediate aftermath of the war, dealt with its psychological consequences and had been written while its creator was still working at the War Office. Although not quite in the same league as its two





immediate precursors, the book was a gripping account of a psycho-analyst who takes on the case of a young R.A.F. pilot with schizophrenia and then realizes that he has bitten off more than he can chew. The working practices of the psycho-analyst were fascinatingly described and the book built skilfully towards the sort of suspenseful, nerve-jangling climax that the author was becoming renowned for. In 1947 Balchin adapted *Mine Own Executioner* for the cinema and the film (starring Burgess Meredith and Kieron Moore) proved to be a distinct critical success.

By now Balchin, in the words of the *New Statesman*, had “established a firm monopoly on his peculiar but admirable territory.” *Darkness Falls From the Air*, *The Small Back Room* and *Mine Own Executioner* had been constructed to a similar blueprint. In essence, all three novels had detailed the same intersection between the professional routine of the male protagonist, described in absorbing technical detail whilst still being intelligible to the layperson, and his love life, which was always under tension and often stretched close to breaking point.

“DEVILISH READABILITY”

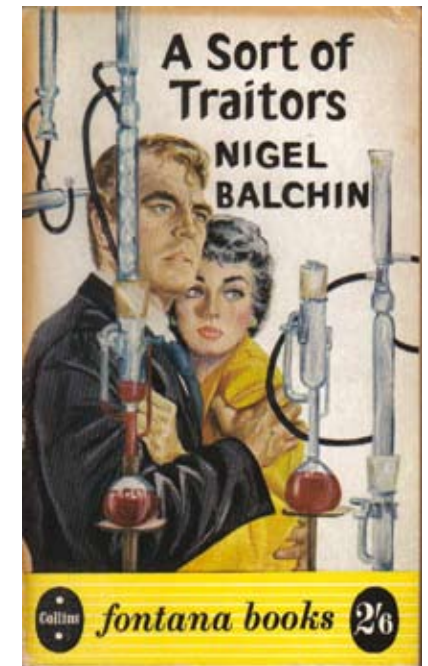
With his next book, Balchin chose to throw this blueprint out of the window and to give his admirers something they were totally unprepared for. *Lord, I Was Afraid* was like no other Balchin novel before or since and, in fact, it soon became clear that it wasn't actually a novel at all. Composed almost entirely of dialogue, this experimental fiction examined the effect of English society on seven contrasting characters who had come of age during the period between the two world wars. Among his many writing achievements, *Lord, I Was Afraid* was the book that Balchin himself valued above all others. Although the least accessible of the author's works, there are brilliant passages in *Lord, I Was Afraid*, many of which are extremely funny.

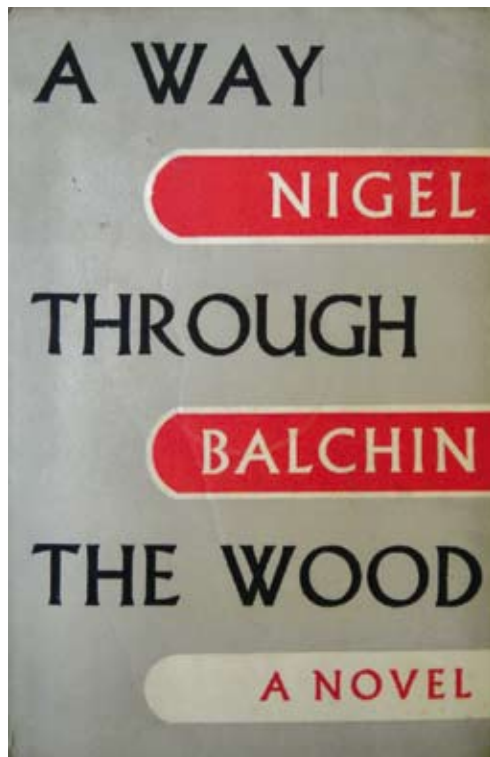
A personal disaster (from which he perhaps never fully recovered) befell Balchin in 1948 when his wife Elisabeth fell in love with the painter and sculptor Michael Ayrton (BMC



123). To cut a very long story short, Balchin divorced his wife in 1951 and Elisabeth married Michael Ayrton a year later.

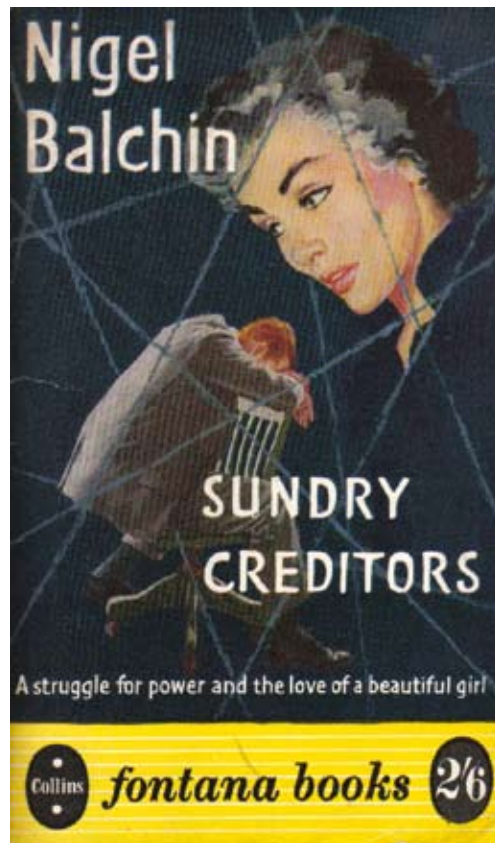
Amidst the turmoil of his private life, Balchin continued to write, partly because of the economic necessity of providing for his three children. The summer of 1948 saw the publication of *The Borgia Testament*, an historical novel written from the point of view of Cesare Borgia. Another departure from what one critic rather unkindly described as “Mr Balchin's formula”, the book attracted mixed reviews but sales were fairly good. The following year, *A Sort of Traitors* arrived at the bookshops. This novel, a return to more familiar Balchin territory, concerned a group of biological research scientists who, despite developing a cure for epidemics, find that scientific progress is stymied by a government minister who is convinced that a foreign power could use the work for nefarious purposes. The book was filmed in an agreeably downbeat adaptation in 1960 by the Boulting Brothers and retitled *Suspect*, starring Tony Britton and Peter





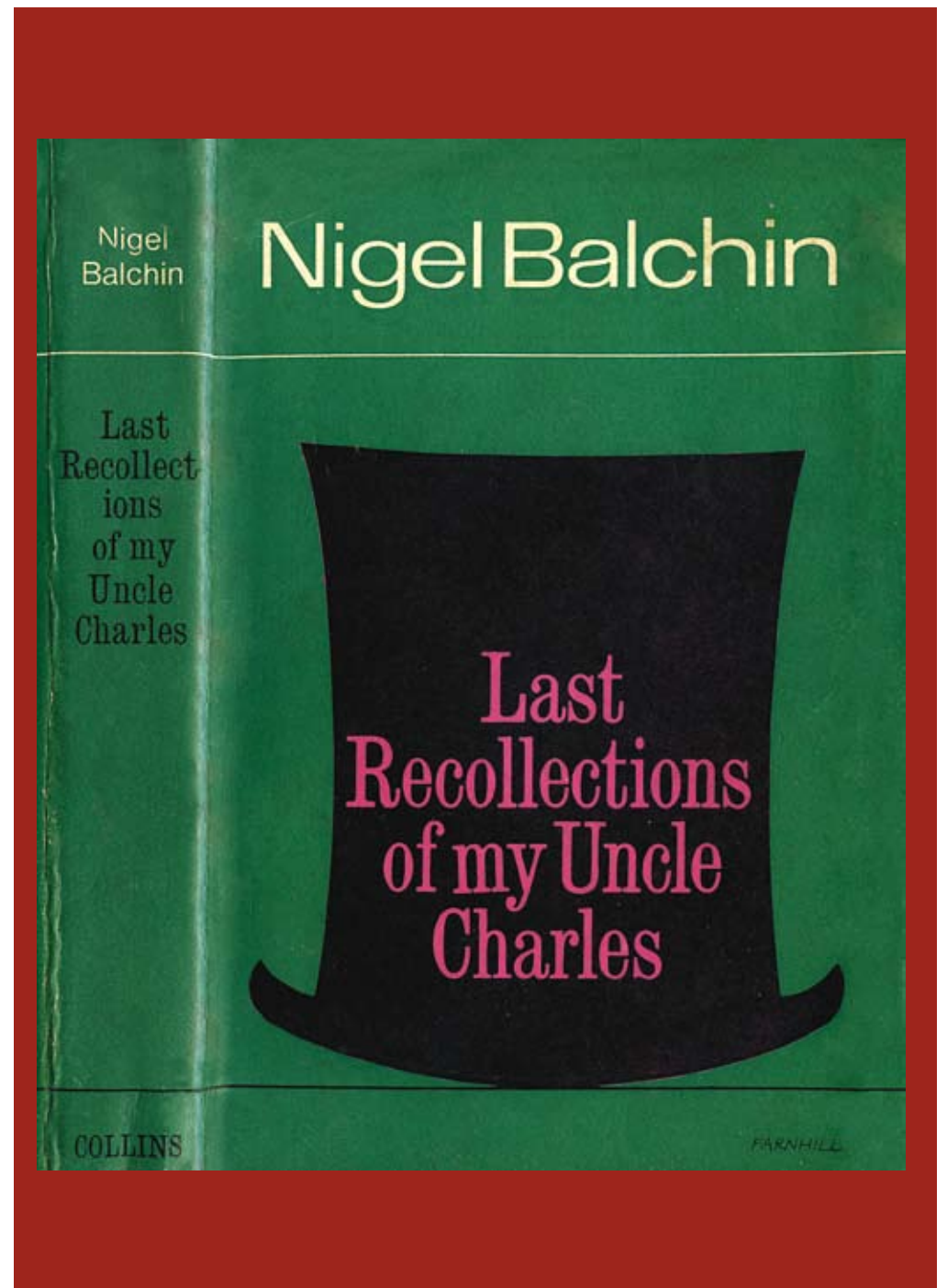
Cushing. (A much earlier film version by Alexander Korda, in which Richard Attenborough was to have played the lead, had fallen through.)

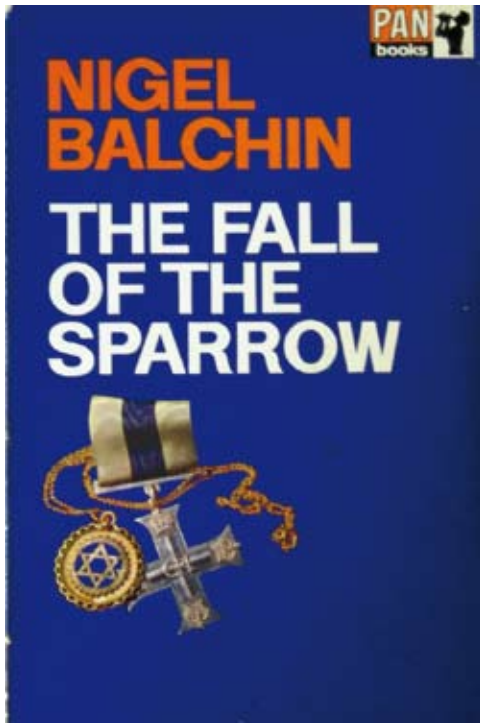
Balchin turned his hand again to non-fiction in 1950 with the publication of *The Anatomy of Villainy*, a series of historical essays. A new novel, *A Way Through the Wood*, appeared the following year. Despite being an absorbing 'police procedural' (a man is killed by a hit-and-run driver and the law try to find the guilty party), the particular significance of this book lies in the fact that it is essentially Balchin's fictionalized response to the loss of his wife. A charming, irresponsible aristocrat has an affair with the wife of a local businessman and ends up living with her. The book is a vivid depiction of the breakdown of a marriage and, as ever with Balchin, the narrative is exceptionally readable. *A Way Through the Wood* was adapted into a stage play in 1954 and, in 2005, served as the template for *Separate Lies*, the directorial debut



of Oscar-winning screenwriter Julian Fellowes. Fellowes updated the story to the present day and with its starry cast (Tom Wilkinson, Emily Watson and Rupert Everett) it proved to be an interesting and poignant movie, albeit one stripped of much of the authentic Balchin flavour. To coincide with the release of *Separate Lies*, Orion Books reissued *A Way Through the Wood* under the film's title.

Balchin remarried in February 1953, his bride being a young Yugoslav called Yovanka Tomich who had been employed as his secretary since 1949. The new relationship seemingly spurred the author into an intense period of creative endeavour and his eleventh novel, *Sundry Creditors*, appeared shortly after his second wedding. Drawing once again on his business experience, Balchin expertly anatomizes the vicissitudes of a Midlands engineering firm





enduring a period of internal upheaval. The author assembled a fine cast of disparate characters for *Sundry Creditors* and he also reverted with great effect to the terse, economical writing style of his wartime novels. A better ending would have made it a minor classic.

Two more books were released in the mid-1950s before Balchin took a seven-year break from novel-writing. The first of these was *Last Recollections of My Uncle Charles*, a collection of stories recounted by the title character, one of the author's more memorable creations. Next came *The Fall of the Sparrow*, a roman-fleuve tracing the rise and fall of a likeable curly-haired charmer named Jason Pellaw. We follow Jason from public school, through Cambridge, fascist-baiting in the East End and heroic exploits in World War Two to his eventual imprisonment for miscellaneous minor felonies. Balchin displays complete mastery of his material and there are few better introductions to his work than *The Fall of the Sparrow*. This is a warm, cosy, mesmerising book, the sort to pick up on a cold

winter's evening and read in one sitting by the fireside.

In 1956, the Balchin family left England, primarily for tax purposes. Balchin had won the BAFTA award for best British screenplay for his work on *The Man Who Never Was*, part of a lucrative contract with Twentieth Century Fox. For the next few years he divided his time between scriptwriting in Hollywood and relaxing at Villa di Tizzano Antella, his sumptuous new home in the Chianti hills above Florence. Despite the idyllic surroundings, all was not well. Balchin, apparently a virtual teetotaler during his early working life, became a heavy drinker later on, and in Florence, with a cellar full of wine, temptation was always close at hand. Balchin's drinking took a heavy toll on his health (as well as on his writing) and he spent much of 1961 in hospital.

Finally, after penning an early version of the script for the well-known cinematic farce that



was *Cleopatra*, the jaded scriptwriter returned to England in 1962. He had experienced all the usual frustrations that British novelists complain of in Hollywood, and arguably his best screenplays (such as *Mandy* and *Mine Own Executioner*) had been produced whilst he was still living on this side of the Atlantic. *Seen Dimly Before Dawn*, written whilst he was still based in Florence, was published the same year. The book was a complete departure from Balchin's 'men at work' vein and in terms of its rural setting, and even some of its ideas, it recalled very early novels such as *Simple Life*. A vivid depiction of a memorable summer in the life of an adolescent, *Seen Dimly Before Dawn* was a consummate page-turner that almost ranked alongside *The Fall of the Sparrow*. Balchin's audience had not forgotten him, and the book sold very well.

There were to be two more Nigel Balchin novels. *In the Absence of Mrs Petersen* was pub-



lished in 1966. This is a modest political thriller which occasionally evokes the works of Eric Ambler and builds to a respectably exhilarating climax. In the following year *Kings of Infinite Space*, the final book of Balchin's uneven career, saw the light of day. The work was commissioned by NASA, who wanted a skilled writer with a scientific background to write a novel to celebrate ten years of the American space programme. The resultant fiction, although an interesting and readable account of the space race, was a long way below the author's best.

The final few years of Balchin's life were difficult ones. He was still drinking heavily on occasions and shortage of money remained a continual problem. After *Kings of Infinite Space* he struggled to make any real headway with his writing and only *Better Dead*, a screenplay for Anglia Television in 1969, attracted much attention. Seeking to provide his family with financial stability, Balchin accepted the task of developing a writing course for an American firm and negotiations were well advanced when, following a trip to the States, he fell ill and was admitted on 14 May 1970 to a London nursing

home suffering from bronchitis. Nigel Balchin died three days later, at the age of just sixty-one. He was survived by his wife Yovanka, together with three children from his first marriage and two from his second.

So why should anyone still read Balchin? I would argue that he deserves to be read for his wit, his humanity, his penetrating psychological insight, the gripping, streamlined plots, the beautiful economy of his writing style, the ultra-realistic dialogue and, above all else, for what

The Guardian once described as the “devilish readability” of the average Balchin novel. His best books (*Darkness Falls From the Air*, *The Small Back Room* and several others) have stood the test of time and their concerns remain highly relevant today. A century on from his birth, Nigel Balchin is ripe for rediscovery.

My thanks to Cassandra and Yovanka (Jane) Balchin for providing the photographs of Nigel and also to Nigel C. Balchin for supplying some of the book cover illustrations.

NIGEL BALCHIN - UK BIBLIOGRAPHY

Priceguide to current values of first editions in Very Good condition without (and with) dustjackets

NOVELS

NO SKY (Hamish Hamilton, 1934)	£10-£15 (£30-£40)
SIMPLE LIFE (Hamish Hamilton, 1935)	£10-£15 (£30-£40)
LIGHTBODY ON LIBERTY (Collins, 1936)	£10-£15 (£30-£40)
DARKNESS FALLS FROM THE AIR (Collins, 1942)	£10-£15 (£30-£40)
THE SMALL BACK ROOM (Collins, 1943)	£4-£6 (£15-£20)
MINE OWN EXECUTIONER (Collins, 1945)	£4-£6 (£15-£20)
LORD, I WAS AFRAID (Collins, 1947)	£3-£4 (£10-£15)
THE BORGIA TESTAMENT (Collins, 1948)	£3-£4 (£10-£15)
A SORT OF TRAITORS (Collins, 1949)	£3-£4 (£10-£15)
A WAY THROUGH THE WOOD (Collins, 1951)	£4-£6 (£10-£15)
Ditto. Retitled SEPARATE LIES (to coincide with film release) (Orion, 2005)	£2-£3 (£8-£10)
SUNDRY CREDITORS (Collins, 1953)	£2-£3 (£8-£10)
THE FALL OF THE SPARROW (Collins, 1955)	£2-£3 (£6-£8)
SEEN DIMLY BEFORE DAWN (Collins, 1962)	£2-£3 (£6-£8)
IN THE ABSENCE OF MRS PETERSEN (Collins, 1966)	£2-£3 (£6-£8)
KINGS OF INFINITE SPACE (Collins, 1967)	£2-£3 (£6-£8)

SHORT STORIES

LAST RECOLLECTIONS OF MY UNCLE CHARLES (Collins, 1954)	£3-£4 (£10-£15)
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HUMOROUS WORKS (by 'Mark Spade')

HOW TO RUN A BASSOON FACTORY; or, Business Explained (Hamish Hamilton, 1934)	£10-£15 (£30-£40)
BUSINESS FOR PLEASURE (Hamish Hamilton, 1935)	£15-£20 (£40-£60)
FUN AND GAMES: How to Win at Almost Anything (Hamish Hamilton, 1936)	£10-£15 (£30-£40)
HOW TO RUN A BASSOON FACTORY and BUSINESS FOR PLEASURE. With an introduction by Nigel Balchin (Hamish Hamilton, 1950)	£4-£6 (£15-£20)

MISCELLANEOUS

INCOME AND OUTCOME. Illustrated by Beresford Egan (Hamish Hamilton, 1936)	£30-£40 (£60-£80)
THE AIRCRAFT BUILDERS: An Account of British Aircraft Production 1935-1945 (HMSO, 1947; wrappers)	£15-£20
THE ANATOMY OF VILLAINY (essays) (Collins, 1950)	£3-£4 (£10-£15)

Derek Collett is currently working on a biography of Nigel Balchin.