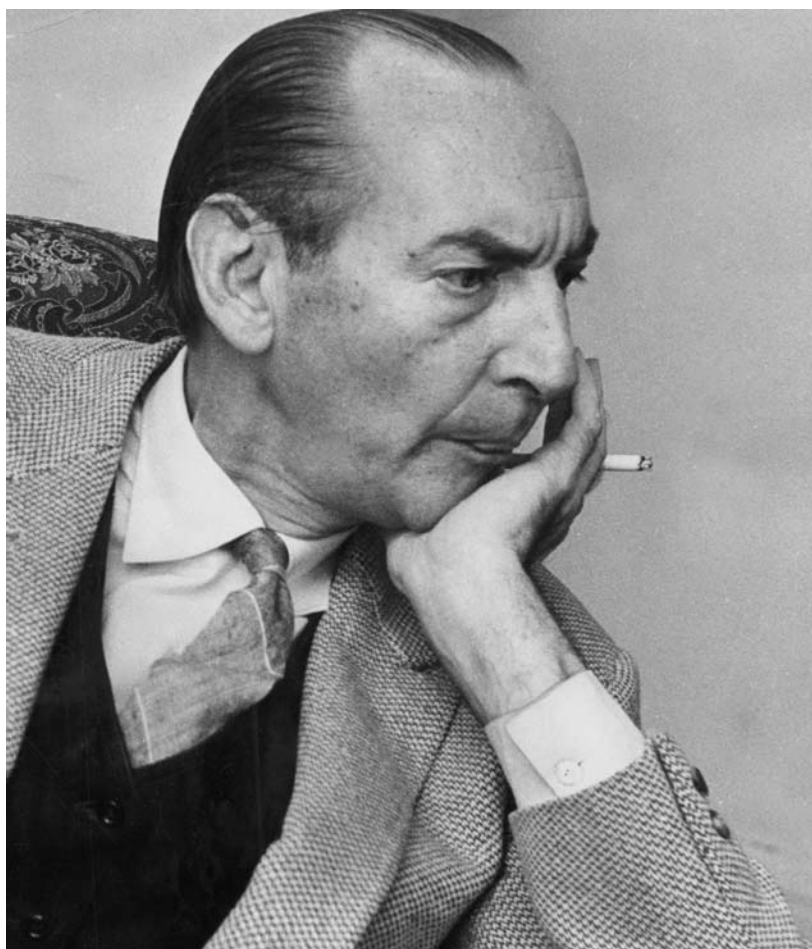


**NOT MANY** people know the name Nigel Balchin these days. Come to think of it, not many people even know how to pronounce the man's surname: I've met book lovers in recent years who've sworn blind that it is 'Bal-kin', when in fact the true pronunciation is 'Ball-chin'. Whenever I do have the good fortune to encounter someone who has actually heard of Balchin, it is a pretty fair bet that they will either be over the age of seventy or a second-hand bookseller or both.

So, for the benefit of the uninitiated, Balchin was a very famous British novelist in the 1940s and 1950s. His best-known novel, 1943's *The Small Back Room*, is a superb account of a Second World War research scientist who has to learn how to defuse a new type of anti-personnel bomb being dropped by the Luftwaffe. The book is a compelling mixture of social history, love story and coruscating satire of petty bureaucracy and office politics. But *The Small Back Room* ascends onto an altogether loftier plane by virtue of a heart-stopping climax that, as one contemporary reviewer put it, 'for sheer excitement, would beat most thrillers hollow'. Balchin's novel was filmed in 1948 by the team of Powell and Pressburger. It was a match made in heaven: The Archers' very faithful adaptation, helped by a cast that included David Farrar, Kathleen Byron, Leslie Banks and Jack Hawkins, remains one of the best British films of the period. It was regularly shown on television by Channel 4 in the 1980s and 1990s but has unaccountably dropped off the schedules more recently. I can only think that some twenty-something executive with chunky designer glasses and a vaping habit decided during a moment of chin-stroking inspiration that the film had somehow lost its relevance. It hasn't.

Septuagenarians and second-hand booksellers are also likely to have heard of *Mine Own Executioner* (1945), Balchin's fascinating case study of a psychoanalyst whose marriage is in the process of unravelling but who nevertheless unwisely agrees to take on the treatment of a dangerous schizophrenic. This book was also successfully filmed, with Burgess Meredith and Kieron Moore in the leading roles of alienist and psychopath, respectively.

Mark Lawson once remarked that Balchin is unusual among novelists because 'he also succeeded in a proper job'. In 1930, Balchin had used his Cambridge education to secure a post as



Nigel Balchin: novelist, scriptwriter, psychologist – and inventor of Black Magic chocolates

# The lost genius of Nigel Balchin

*The author of several compelling novels of the Forties and Fifties is now sadly forgotten, says* **DEREK COLLETT**

an industrial psychologist. While he was working for the chocolate-makers Rowntree's he was put in charge of a huge market research project that led directly to the launch of Black Magic chocolates in 1933. Such research was radical because Balchin's team actually went to the trouble of asking consumers which chocolates they would like included in an

assortment; until this point, they were generally expected just to munch their way through whatever the manufacturers designed to fill the boxes with. Balchin's other crucial contribution to the success of Black Magic centred on its packaging. Standing in front of a confectioner's window, he observed that his eyes were

*continues over the page*

ASSOCIATED NEWSPAPERS/REX

assailed by 'every colour but black'. This is why the chocolates were housed in an uncompromisingly modern monochrome box – very daring for the 1930s – as opposed to one adorned with a stereotypical 'chocolate box' image of a fluffy kitten or a winsome, flaxen-haired moppet in soft focus. Balchin's box has defiantly stood the test of time as it remains much the same in 2015 as it was in the 1930s.

Balchin also demonstrated his staggering omnicompetence during the war. After a year at the Ministry of Food, which informed his absorbing 1942 'Blitz novel' *Darkness Falls from the Air*, he volunteered for the Army. Here he made many telling contributions to the war effort in the areas of personnel selection and scientific research and made such a forceful impression on the top brass that he ended the conflict as deputy scientific adviser to the Army Council, with the rank of brigadier.

With three acclaimed novels under his belt (two of them bestsellers), Balchin had established himself as one of the country's foremost popular novelists by the end of 1945. He then became a film scriptwriter, working first in England and later in Hollywood. The screenplays he wrote range from the highly competent (*Mine Own Executioner* and *Mandy*) to the teeth-grindingly awful (the John Wayne vehicle *The Barbarian and the Geisha* and a very ill-advised remake of the 1930s classic *The Blue Angel*). The best picture that Balchin scripted was *The Man Who Never Was* and his handiwork deservedly won him the 1957 Bafta for Best British Screen-



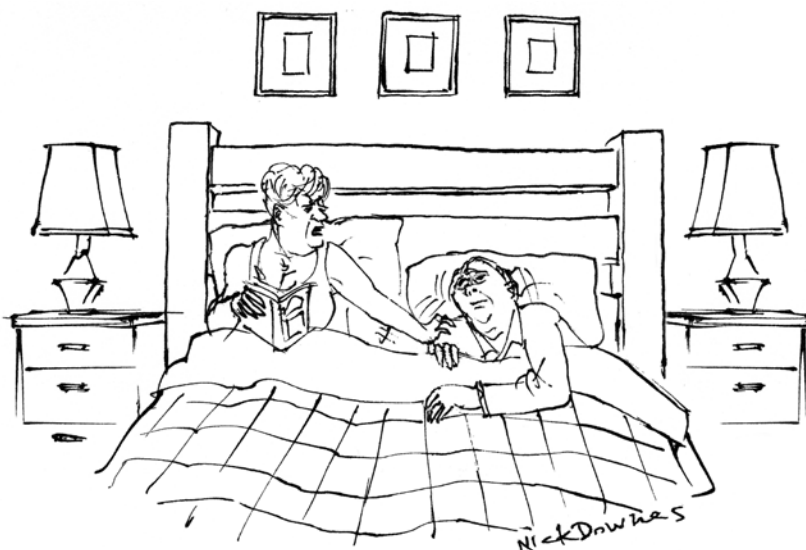
play. The movie was a dramatisation of the wartime deception plot involving a corpse and some false documents that was recently retold in Ben Macintyre's enthralling book *Operation Mincemeat*. Balchin also scripted 1963's *Cleopatra* but his overly highbrow screenplay was jettisoned long before the Elizabeth Taylor/Richard Burton behemoth opened in movie theatres. Balchin therefore always jokingly referred to his script as 'the first folio edition of *Cleopatra*'.

It was while Balchin was in Hollywood in the late 1950s, toiling away on scripts for a string of indifferent movies,

that alcoholism began to exert a real hold on his life. This is one of the principal reasons why his last few books did not maintain the high standard he had set during the 1940s and 1950s and it may also help to explain why he is not as well known today as he should be: if he had gone out in a blaze of literary glory then things might perhaps have turned out differently. When he died in 1970, aged just 61, it was hard to believe that Balchin's addiction had not played at least some part in the cruel shortening of his life.

Balchin's finest novels are easy to appreciate. There is depth and complexity on offer for those who demand those qualities but, on the surface, they are just rattling good stories that unfold in a straightforward linear fashion. Philippa Gregory has provided an admirable encapsulation of the archetypal Balchin novel: 'It starts at the beginning, it has a splendid shape, it has good characterisation, good dialogue, and it goes from A through to Z in a very logical sequence.' All I would add to that description is that, in the course of more than thirty years as a fiction writer, Balchin produced a bookshelf's worth of intensely readable novels. John Betjeman was one of the first critics to identify this attribute when he remarked in the 1940s that Balchin was 'one of our dozen readable living writers of genius'. Such readability should not be dismissed lightly. Put it this way: what would you rather pick up to read on a vile winter's evening with rain lashing against the windows, the wind howling in the eaves, a glass of whisky at your elbow and a roaring fire in the grate: a recent Booker Prize winner (which will probably turn out to be a turgid thousand-page saga set in 18th-century Ceylon or India) or a stimulating page-turner such as Balchin's *A Sort of Traitors*, *Sundry Creditors* or *The Fall of the Sparrow*?

I don't know which opinion-formers are responsible for deciding whether a writer should remain popular after his death or be banished into obscurity but it has evidently been decreed that Balchin should suffer the latter fate. However, on the back of support from influential admirers such as Clive James, Ruth Rendell, Julian Fellowes and Philippa Gregory, there should still be time for Balchin's once-glorious reputation to be rehabilitated. Who knows, perhaps one day people will even learn how to pronounce his surname correctly! 🍷



'Harold, wake up – you were smiling in your sleep, again'