

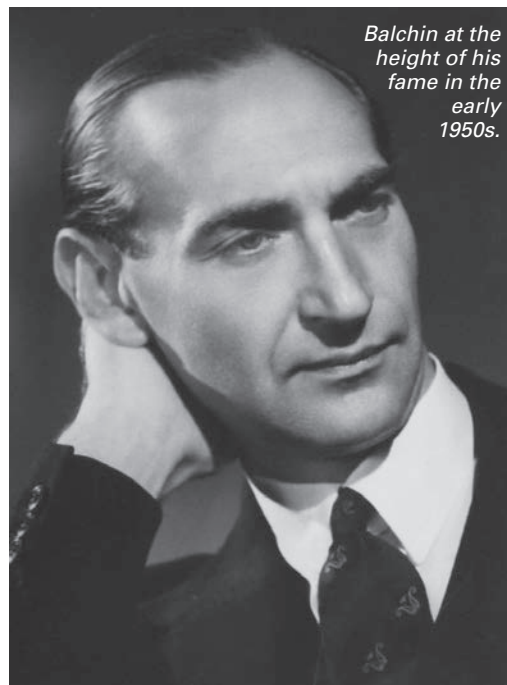
**N**igel Balchin, the novelist and screenwriter who died in 1970, was the archetypal Englishman. He was born (in 1908) in rural Wiltshire; he came from an ancient Surrey family that can trace their lineage back some 20 generations; he spoke with a refined “plum-in-the-mouth” accent; he was educated at Cambridge; and, in terms of his personality, he was a quiet, cultured and reserved individual who liked to blend into the background whenever possible.

# NIGEL BALCHIN

## A Very English Writer

Of the 14 novels that Balchin wrote, all but two are set predominantly in England. As well as being the archetypal Englishman, it is therefore also fair to say that Balchin is a very English writer and many of his books contain detailed descriptions of the beautiful English landscape. Sensibly, he tended to use places that he knew very well as the locations for his fiction. So 1935's *Simple Life*, his second novel, was set in the Wiltshire countryside he had known intimately as a child, with most of the action taking place on or around Salisbury Plain. In several of his novels, Balchin drew on memories of his student days to write scenes set in Cambridge (either in the grounds of the colleges or in punts on the Cam) that revel in the tranquil green spaces of the fenland city. And Balchin did not neglect Britain's industrial heartland either: one of his novels was set in the Black Country and another in the north of England.

Two of Balchin's finest novels feature the south-east corner of England, a part of the world that he knew well because he lived there for about 10 years after the end of the Second World War. One of these books is *Seen Dimly Before Dawn* (1962). The events in this warm, romantic novel take place on a fruit farm situated not far from Canterbury. Balchin lived in



Balchin at the height of his fame in the early 1950s.

the idyllic village of Stelling Minnis, about eight miles south of Canterbury, in the late 1940s and so was able to rely on local knowledge when writing *Seen Dimly Before Dawn*.

The other Balchin novel with a south-east England connection is *A Way Through the Wood*. First published in 1951, this book is due to be reissued next year by Orion Books. Most of the story unfolds in the fictional village of “Maidley”, which the author tells us is in Sussex. Balchin moved from Kent to London in 1949 when his marriage broke up but soon bought a cottage (which had been converted from an old oast house) in the village of Sempstead, near Robertsbridge. He wrote *A Way Through the Wood* whilst living in his new abode, Oast Cottage, and so it is only natural that the Sussex scenery on his doorstep had an effect on the book. But as the county boundary with Kent was only a few miles away from Sempstead it is not surprising that “The Garden of England” also finds its way into *A Way Through the Wood*. Some of the geography described in the novel is quite similar to that in the vicinity of Balchin's home in Stelling Minnis and there is also an exhilarating high-speed car journey from London to Sussex which passes through a broad swathe of Kent. This book is also notable for a quintessentially English scene at a village fete that was probably inspired by fetes that Balchin had attended as a boy growing up in Wiltshire.



The author's childhood home at West Lavington in Wiltshire.

The Kent countryside, here near Luddesdown, featured in Balchin's books.

ADAM SWAINE



*A Way Through the Wood* was filmed in 2005 by Julian Fellowes, the writer and creator of *Downton Abbey*. The movie that Fellowes developed from Balchin's book was retitled *Separate Lies* and starred Tom Wilkinson, Emily Watson and Rupert Everett. *Separate Lies* is a very English melodrama that is well worth watching (it can still be obtained on DVD).

In addition to being a very English writer, Balchin is, more specifically, a London writer, because the three superb novels with which he made his name during the 1940s were all set in the capital and make extensive use of London locations. *Darkness Falls from the Air* was released in 1942, but was recently reissued by Orion. This book has been accurately described as "the classic novel of the London Blitz" and almost all of the action takes place in the city. Landmarks such as Piccadilly Circus and St. James's Park crop up in the story, almost as many London streets are namechecked than are to be found on a Monopoly board and there are evocative descriptions of people sheltering from air raids in Hampstead Tube station. The book also contains a fantastically exciting climax set in the Commercial Road in Aldgate. Anyone who reads *Darkness Falls from the Air* will gain an excellent insight into what it must have been like to have lived and worked in the heart of London during the aerial bombardment of autumn 1940.

*'In addition to being a very English writer, Balchin is, more specifically, a London writer'*

Balchin's follow-up to *Darkness Falls from the Air* was *The Small Back Room*. Published in 1943, this is the most famous of all his novels and a new version was released by Orion in the autumn. The book tells the story of Sammy Rice, a "back-room boy" whose job is to develop military technology with the aim of shortening the Second World War. Although based in London, Rice is obliged to travel around the country investigating a new type of bomb being dropped by the Luftwaffe that has the nasty habit of blowing up innocent civilians.

Celebrated film director Michael Powell made a superb, atmospheric adaptation of *The Small Back Room* for the cinema in 1948. In the early chapters of his book, Balchin had described weapons-testing trials at a place he called "Graveley Bank" but which was probably inspired by Salisbury Plain, which was used by the army as long ago as Balchin's childhood (and still is today). Powell obviously thought that Balchin had been influenced by Wiltshire because he set the weapons trials at Stonehenge! Happily, the guns were pointing away from the

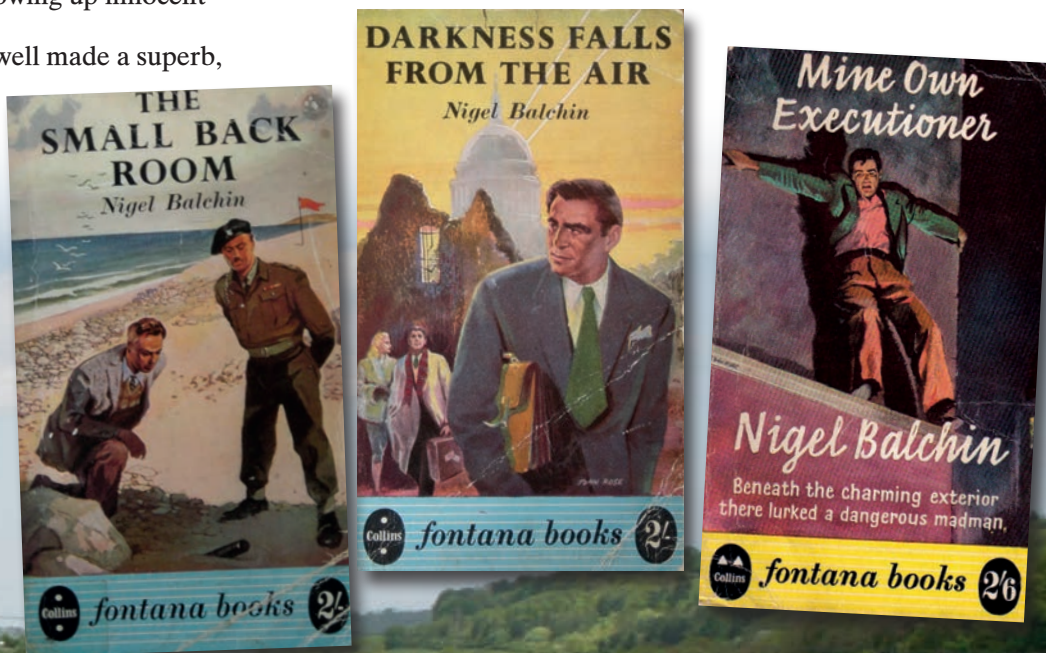


Balchin lived in this imposing house in Stelling Minnis, near Canterbury in Kent, for several years after the Second World War.

stones themselves. The film ends with a desperately tense bomb disposal scene played out on an English seashore. In his novel, Balchin had located this scene on a sandy beach in the fictional seaside town of "Luganporth". But Powell was extremely fond of Dorset and so transported the action to the shingle of Chesil Bank, near Weymouth, which provided a fitting backdrop for the movie's nerve-tingling denouement.

1945's *Mine Own Executioner*, a story about a psychoanalyst and his troubled patients, was the third book in Balchin's wartime sequence and was set almost exclusively in London. Another great London novel of Balchin's is *A Sort of Traitors* (1949): virtually all of the action takes place in the city and brilliant descriptions of West End gentlemen's clubs rub up against those of cheap cafés and lodging houses. The gloomily austere world of late 1940s London is convincingly brought to life in this book.

Balchin acted out a number of typically English roles during his lifetime. Between 1955 and 1962 he chose to live overseas,





in Paris, Florence and Hollywood, while he worked as a film scriptwriter and therefore played the role of “the Englishman abroad”. Then, beginning in the late 1950s, Balchin and his second wife occupied a string of palatial properties in both England and Italy as Balchin indulged a fantasy of living like an upper-class English gent. This was ironic really because he had come from a very humble background indeed and was perennially short of money, even when he was doing well with his novels and film scripts.



Finally, there is a long-standing tradition in this country of the “talented amateur”, by which I mean someone who is very skilled at something but pursues it more as a pastime than a profession. Balchin fits into this category very neatly. As well as being a brilliant (self-taught) writer, he was also an authority on oriental rugs, a skilled woodcarver, a knowledgeable collector of paintings and sculpture, a green-fingered gardener with a passion for growing fruit trees, a lover of the Norse sagas and a gifted musician — but these were all just hobbies to him. Balchin was also a fine amateur sportsman who was good enough to have played Minor Counties cricket for his native Wiltshire in

Several of Balchin’s finest novels, including “*The Small Back Room*” were written in a flat at the top of this block in London’s Holland Park.

**Below:** The author crossing America by train on scriptwriting business in the mid-1950s.



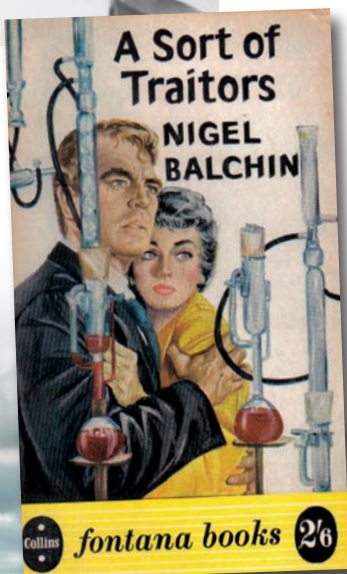
his youth. And yet when he was asked once about his sporting prowess he merely remarked that he specialised in “looking like a good player out of practice”. Such modesty!

Nigel Balchin was a fine example of an English gentleman and the writer of a varied array of novels that are English through and through. Those wishing to sample Balchin’s fiction are advised to start with the three books that Orion have reissued and then to work their way — with the help of libraries and secondhand bookshops — onwards from there.

DEREK COLLETT

#### Further Information:

Derek Collett’s biography of Balchin, *His Own Executioner: The Life of Nigel Balchin*, is published by SilverWood Books.



The view over the rooftops of Cambridge.

STEVE BRYANT