looking back

A door to minds and emotions

Derek Collett looks at the life and psychological novels of Nigel Balchin

There is practically nothing in which I am not or can not be intensely interested. — Nigel Balchin

In 1950, when he was close to the peak of his fame as a novelist, Nigel Balchin issued this statement as part of a character sketch he wrote for an American newspaper. One thing that was intensely interesting in was psychology. Balchin’s daughter, the childcare expert Penelope Leach, once admitted to me that her father had effectively been a psychologist all his life. As I will show in this article, psychology made a big impact on him even when he was still a young man and it runs right through his writing. (It is quite plausible that Balchin’s psychological novels were an inspiration to several writers who were later to become psychologists.)

During his first few years with the NIP, Balchin attended to “human factor aspects” such as eliminating unnecessary motions made by factory workers, making the working day less tedious, removing obstructions in the workplace, revamping production lines and improving transport procedures.

Despite Black Magic having triumphantly proved that chocolate manufacturers could decisively benefit from the expertise of industrial psychologists, Balchin’s consumer research proved to be a dead end. George Miles, Director of the NIP when Black Magic was launched, crystallised one line of thought regarding the Institute’s foray into the world of market research:

Some people had a rather snobbish attitude towards these investigations and looked on them as lowering the dignity of the Institute. They were also “commercial and opportunistic.”

Balchin during Second World War

Balchin left the NIP to join the British army in 1939, and was given a fresh opportunity to contribute to the scientific community. In 1941 when he joined the army’s Directorate of Selection of Personnel (which may have been instrumental in Balchin landing this position as well), he was given a role that was the perfect combination of his psychological talents and the pressures of the war.

Balchin experienced great success for several years working for the NIP as an “industrial investigator.” His job primarily consisted of visiting factories, offices and other workplaces, examining existing working practices in operation and then ascertaining where and how improvements could be made. The Cambridge graduate would probably have received only a rudimentary training and would have been expected to learn heavily on his skill and judgement in order to solve problems. One of his most famous investigations was that of the modus operandi of the NIP’s investigations staff. The Institute’s investigators had no previous prepared remedies to apply, and they had in effect to make a diagnosis of the situation they found and to seek for improvements from the human point of view wherever they thought it possible to make them.

Balchin’s first novel also emerged as an obvious by-product of his time with the NIP. Published just a few months before Balchin left the Institute to join Rowntree’s, No Sky (1934) was a slice of social realism about a Cambridge graduate working as a time-and-motion man in an engineering factory. The follow-up to No Sky, 1935’s Simple Life, was influenced by Balchin’s Rowntree’s experiences. It recounts the tale of a young advertising copywriter who is against the stresses and strains of London life and moves to Wiltshire in search of a simpler, pastoral existence. The first part of the book is set in an advertising agency (almost certainly based on J. Walter Thompson) and constitutes a richly amusing satire of Balchin’s work on the Black Magic account.

The Small Back Room [1943] Balchin’s first best-seller, The Small Back Room was also the first of a series of novels he wrote that featured an industrial psychologist who was ‘damaged’ in some way (either physically or psychologically). Sammy Rice is a Second World War specialist scientist speculating in the development of new weapons, and a man with a fascination for explosives who is ‘crushed’ by a terrorist bombing (possibly because his real one was blown off in the course of his work), a drunk problem and a girlfriend whom he psychology

Balchin was given a fresh opportunity to demonstrate his psychological acumen in 1941 when he joined the army’s Directorate of Selection of Personnel (which may have been instrumental in Balchin landing this position as well). As a member of Psychological Committee in 1939, the year in which Balchin was added to the Institute’s staff,) Balchin was given the task of creating a new chocolate assortment on behalf of the confectioners Rowntree’s. Balchin and colleagues performed a very large consumer survey: 7000 members of the public and 2500 shopkeepers filled in questionnaires to elicit their opinions regarding what would constitute the perfect chocolate assortment. Balchin used the Hollerith punchcard system to analyse the data generated and then organised extensive taste tests to determine the composition of the assortment. Given the name Black Magic, the new boxes of chocolates began to tumble off the conveyer belt at the beginning of 1933 and proved to be a significant (and lasting) success for Rowntree’s. Incidentally, it was Balchin who had the idea of packing the chocolates inside a plain black box. (See also https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/ volume-20/edition-9/online-only-article-consumer-research-1939 available at https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-14/edition-1/charlie-and-chocolate-factory)

Balchin’s psychological novels Speaking as a layman, I suppose that all novels that concern human beings must be psychological to at least some extent. But Balchin went further than most of his contemporaries in trying to get inside the heads of his characters and work out what made them tick.

Early work

Balchin’s most important written contribution to the field of industrial psychology is almost certainly How to Run a Bassoon Factory, an entertaining spoof of his career as an industrial investigator but one underpinned by a kernel of solid common sense. The author claimed in 1969 that the book was still ‘required reading in certain business training’ and it gives a flavour of the working life of a 1930s industrial psychologist.

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loves but refuses to marry as he considers himself not good enough for her. The Luftwaffe are dropping bombs that explode when interfered with on the ground, and several civilians are killed as a result. When an army officer is also blown to pieces whilst attempting to defuse one of the devices, Sammy is summoned to tackle another of the bombs. Despite its conventional thriller-style climax, The Small Back Room is really about an inadequate man battling against almost impossible odds and, in the process, trying to prove something to himself, and this was to become a popular theme for Balchin.

Mine Own Executioner (1945)

By some distance, Mine Own Executioner is Balchin's most obvious 'psychological' novel.

When Adam Lucian first enters the consulting room of psychoanalyst Felix Milne it is clear that he represents a tough therapeutic challenge. Lucian is a former Spitfire pilot who was shot down over Burma, captured by the Japanese and viciously tortured. He escaped and made his way back to England, only to make several attempts to kill his wife. The novel thus resolves itself into a straightforward race against time: can Felix analyse and 'cure' Lucian before the schizophrenic airman succeeds in murdering his wife?

Unusually for Balchin, Mine Own Executioner did not emerge from his own work experiences. Penelope Leach has informed me that her father had a 'passionate desire' to be a psychoanalyst but he never actually worked as one. Alarmingly though, given his lack of medical qualifications, Balchin once remarked that he had practised in an amateur fashion as an abnormal psychologist throughout the 1930s.

A Sort of Traitors (1949)

Very under-rated, but one of Balchin's best novels. A Sort of Traitors is one of two 'moral dilemma' stories that he penned in quick succession.

A team of biologists develop a new cure for epidemics. A government minister then steps in and says, 'You cannot publish this work. A netherworld power might turn it on its head and use it as the basis for a biological weapon.' Two of the biologists therefore face a stark choice: should they publish and be damned (and quite possibly go to prison for treason as a result) or should they merely comply with the gagging order and effectively condemn millions of people in the Third World to a slow and painful death?

A Way Through the Wood (1951)

Balchin's second 'social maze' novel also formed the basis – in the guise of 2005's Separate Lies – for the impressive directorial debut of Downton Abbey creator Julian Fellowes.

A cyclist is killed in a hit-and-run accident. Jim Manning, a local JP, has an inkling that the car responsible might have been driven by the Honourable William Bule, a near-neighbour of his with some conveniently flexible ideas about the difference between right and wrong. Manning confronts Bule but the aristocrat pleads his innocence. Manning's wife then confesses that it was Bule's car that hit the unlucky cyclist but that she was driving it at the time. Moreover, she admits that she has been having an affair with Bule for months. Manning must therefore decide between reporting his wife's misdeemeanor to the police (with the attendant risk of her being put behind bars) or perpetrating the course of justice by saying nothing and hoping that the culprit is never found.

Sunday Creditors (1953)

Like Balchin's debut No Sky, this novel is set in a factory but is concerned less with the nuts and bolts of industrial psychology and more with unpicking the character of Walter Lang, megalomaniacal Managing Director of the engineering works at the heart of the novel. Lang was loosely based on George Harris, Chairman of Rowntree between 1941 and 1952.

The Fall of the Sparrow (1955)

In 1948 Balchin had published The Borgia: a short spell during the Second World War when he displays both courage and resourcefulness as an army officer; he is never able to stick at anything, and his personal relationships are tantamount to a disaster. In one of his most satisfying and well-rounded novels (a blurb writer observed 'Here is Mr Balchin in his most brilliant mood'), the author takes us right back to Jason's early childhood, examines the causes of his subsequent mental instability and shows how he ended up in the dock accused of stealing from his nearest and dearest.

Read on:

The Small Back Room and A Way Through the Wood have recently been reissued by Weidenfeld & Nicolson. All of the other Balchin books mentioned are currently out of print but secondhand copies can usually be found on the web. I heartily recommend you make the effort.

Derek Collett's own biography of Balchin – His Own Executioner: The Life of Nigel Balchin – is published by SilverWood Books backroomboy@talktalk.net