

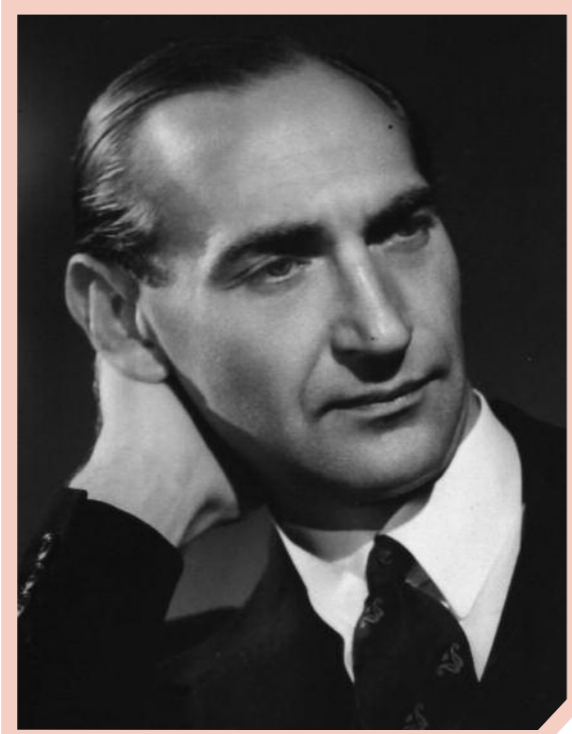
A door to minds and emotions

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 he was intensely interested 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 Balchin when he was still a young man and it runs right through his fiction like the lettering inside a stick of seaside rock.

Balchin studied psychology in his final term at Cambridge. His tutor was Frederic Bartlett, Director of the Cambridge Psychological Laboratory and Reader in Experimental Psychology. Bartlett was an extremely charismatic man: his lectures were apparently 'a festive performance which nobody would have dreamed of missing', and Balchin quickly fell under his spell. According to one of his student friends, Balchin's interest in psychology was not simply theoretical. The undergraduate was also in the habit of asking 'all his friends and acquaintances about their dreams and, if they would discuss it, about their sexual thoughts and experiences'. Many years after he left Cambridge, Balchin described the impact that psychology had made on him while he was a student. He felt that, as a result of the discoveries of Freud, Jung and Adler, 'a door had been



opened to the understanding of the minds and emotions of men'. Consequently, Balchin was convinced that 'there was a new heaven and a new earth just round the corner'.

From Cambridge, Balchin went not to a new heaven but to London and a job with the National Institute of Industrial

Psychology. (It is quite plausible that Bartlett helped to facilitate this placement as he was a member of the NIIP's Scientific Committee in 1930, the year in which Balchin was added to the Institute's strength.) Inaugurated just nine years before Balchin joined it, the NIIP was an innovative non-governmental agency formed with the aim of using psychological principles to tackle some of the thornier problems encountered in industry. Specifically, it strove to improve the lot of the worker whilst

simultaneously raising productivity. Balchin experienced great success for several years working for the NIIP as an 'industrial investigator'.

Balchin's job partly consisted of visiting factories, offices and other workplaces, examining the 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 obliged to lean heavily on his skill and judgement in order to solve problems. One of his fellow investigators, Clifford Frisby, who later became the Institute's Director, outlined the modus operandi of the NIIP's investigations staff:

The Institute's investigators had no ready-prepared remedies to apply; 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.

During his first few years with the NIIP, Balchin attended to 'human factor' aspects such as eliminating unnecessary movements made by factory workers, making the working day less tedious, removing obstructions in the workplace, revising factory layouts and improving transport procedures.

Although Balchin could sometimes be cynical about the value of the work he carried out for the NIIP (he once told a friend that it had mainly consisted of 'seeing a good idea in Factory A and selling it to the manager of Factory B'), the fact that his salary increased by over 50 per cent in under four years suggests that he had excelled as an industrial psychologist and that he was highly thought of by his superiors.

After a couple of years of reorganising factories, Balchin obtained his big break in 1932 when he was put in charge of a market research project run in collaboration with the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, the eventual goal of which was to launch 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 punched-card system to analyse the data generated and then organised extensive tasting tests to determine the composition of the assortment. Given the name Black

Magic, the new boxes of chocolates began to rumble off the conveyor 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-1958> and <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-14/edition-11/charlie-and-chocolate-factory>].

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 NIIP 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 to the dignity of the Institute. They were also 'commercial' and 'opportunist'.

It must also be pointed out that Cadbury's, Rowntree's principal competitor, were contributing £700 a year (about £45,000 today) throughout the 1930s. Unlike Rowntree's, they were receiving no return on their investment and so complained to the NIIP about this state of affairs. Partly as a result of this pressure, the Institute decided that market research lay outside its remit and so quietly dropped it.

Balchin left the NIIP to join



Balchin during Second World War

Rowntree's in the wake of this decision but continued to be involved in the field of consumer research right up until the outbreak of the war. In the second half of the 1930s he performed a vast number of chocolate tasting tests, many of which involved a new Rowntree's line: the bubble-filled milk chocolate bar Aero.

Balchin was given a fresh opportunity to demonstrate his psychological acumen in 1941 when he joined the army's Directorate of Selection of Personnel (Bartlett may have been instrumental in Balchin landing this position as well). As part of a team of psychologists, Balchin devised and implemented aptitude tests to assess the calibre of aspirant soldiers. His experience with Black Magic was not wasted because he persuaded the army to adopt the Hollerith system to sift the enormous volume of data produced during the testing procedure. This new personnel selection scheme improved both the quantity – about 700,000 men were processed during the war – and quality of army recruits, and one of Balchin's departmental colleagues claimed that 'psychologists transformed morale in the British army from zero level in 1942'.

Army psychologists, including Major Nigel Balchin, also played a crucial role in the introduction of the War Office Selection Boards in the summer of 1942. This new system for selecting army officers later served as the basis for the peacetime Civil Service Selection Boards. Balchin and his fellow members of DSP devised a mixture of leaderless group tests, outdoor practical tests, indoor discussions and interviews by two officers

and a psychiatrist, all with the aim of helping to identify servicemen with officer potential.

In 1961 Balchin spoke about trying to obtain another post as an industrial psychologist. That ambition came to nothing, but by then he had long since established a firm hold on his position as one of Britain's foremost purveyors of fiction with a psychological theme.

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 works

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.

Balchin's first novel also emerged as an obvious by-product of his time with the NIIP. Published just a few months before he 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 quits 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 men who were 'damaged' in some way (either physically or psychologically).

Sammy Rice is a Second World War scientist specialising in the development of new weapons. He has an aluminium foot (possibly because his real one was blown off in the course of his work), a drink problem and a girlfriend whom he

looking back

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. Alarming 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 nefarious foreign 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 meekly 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 'moral 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.

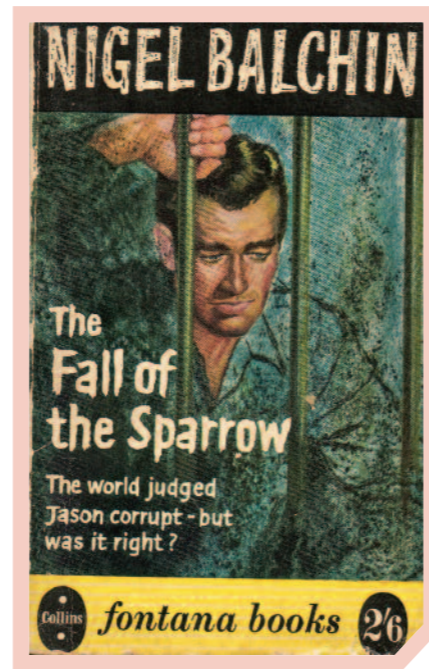
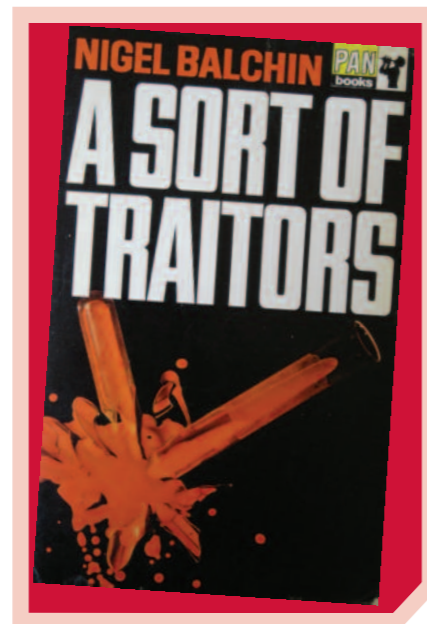
A cyclist is killed in a hit-and-run accident. Jim Manning, a local JP, has an inkling that the car responsible might have been driven by the Honourable William Bule, a near-neighbour of his with some conveniently flexible ideas about the difference between right and wrong. Manning confronts Bule but 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 misdemeanour to the police (with the attendant risk of her being put behind bars) or perverting the course of justice by saying nothing and hoping that the culprit is never found.

Sundry 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's between 1941 and 1952.

The Fall of the Sparrow (1955)

In 1948 Balchin had published *The Borgia*



Testament. This fictionalised autobiography of Cesare Borgia, 15th-century Italian warlord, effectively took the form of a penetrating psychological examination of the motives and methods of a deranged personality. With *The Fall of the Sparrow*, Balchin revisited the same territory as the later novel also constituted a psychological case study of a disturbed individual.

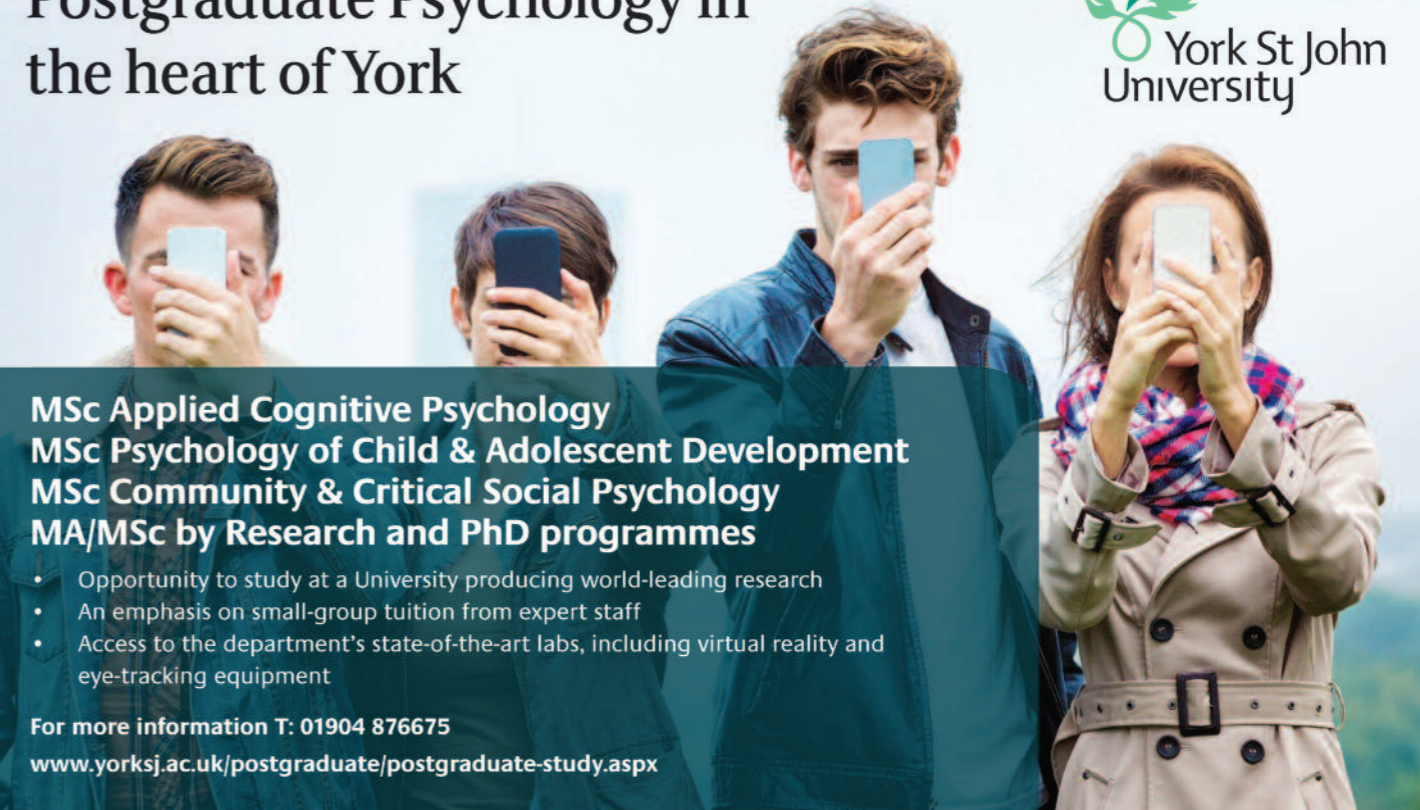
Jason Pellew is a dreamer who drifts through life in a sort of daze. Except for a short spell during the Second World War when he displays both courage and resourcefulness as an army officer; he is never able to stick at anything, and his personal relationships are tantamount to a disaster. In one of 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

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