

The Socialist and the Detective Story: The Case of Dan Billany's *The Opera House Murders*

Paul Skrebels

Dan Billany's detective novel *The Opera House Murders* was published by Faber and Faber in September 1940 to considerable critical acclaim. The *Sunday Times* reviewer described it as 'packed with action and murder and ... one of the fastest-moving adventures we have ever read', while the *Manchester Evening News* declared that "'Billany for Villainy" should become Mr Faber's war-cry' (Reeves and Showan 76). In March 1941 it was published in the USA by Harpers with the title *It Takes a Thief*, and to a similar reception: 'It's grand and the kid has got it ... I'm breaking a rule and rating this one Grade AA', said Ed Fitzgerald on American radio (76). There were even moves by the publishers to sell the film rights (81).

Billany had been born into a strongly socialist working-class family in Hull, Yorkshire, in 1913, the very year that E. C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case* appeared, a work regarded as ushering in a 'Golden Age' of detective fiction that was to last until the Second World War (*Oxford Companion* 270). Despite this coincidence, Billany, like others of his generation reaching adulthood in the 'Pink' decade of the 1930s, came to resent the typical Golden Age detective story's 'snobbery, nostalgia, and lack of social concern' (270). The outbreak of war did little to diminish the fervour of his politics, and particularly, as his later writings show, his strong sense of class consciousness. Vague hopes for a new world order may have informed the writings of certain poets, novelists and essayists, but for Billany the old class system was proving itself considerably resistant to the pressures of a so-called People's War. Two years after the publication of *The Opera House Murders*, Billany was in a prisoner-of-war camp for Allied officers in Italy following his capture in North Africa on 1 June 1942. There he wrote a novel based on his family history and

Page 6

his own war experiences – it was published posthumously as *The Trap* in 1950 – in which he turns on the very genre which, to that point, represented his sole claim to literary fame. He singles out for attack Dorothy L. Sayers and her detective hero Lord Peter Wimsey as survivors of a literature where 'Real Human Beings' are 'the gentle Writer and the gentle Reader' for whom,

from the windows of Rugby Chapel or Eton, from Oxford or from Park Lane, ... the working-class, those droll, non-literary, non-ablutionary, non-intelligent, non-creative masses, made a pleasant background of racy, smelly, ludicrous movements for the activities of the normal non-working world. (Billany, *Trap* 26)

In such a literature, says Billany, the working classes are a 'sub-human species' drawn with a 'Few Bold Strokes' into either 'comic relief' caricatures or 'as examples of Humble Worth' (27). In the figure of Wimsey, Sayers perpetuates this attitude, and neither is spared Billany's sarcasm and disgust:

How her Lord compromises within himself the delicate wit, the erudition, the calm, the intelligence and all the rest of the virtues natural to the non-working world! How skilfully and with how few words, he corrects the Common Persons he meets in the 'bus, train or street! How the vulgar, 'flashy', 'horsey', persons of the Lower Orders, the bobbies, the sergeants, the plumbers, the butchers and the bellringers become the hilarious laughing stocks of Lord Peter's and Dorothy's wit – that wit so subtle and so sensitive, so delicate and so adroit. (28)

In 1943 Billany and a fellow POW, David Dowie, wrote a novel of prison-camp life published in 1949 as *The Cage*. The first half is a quirky mixture of vignettes and observations of camp life that foreshadow *The Goon Show's* humour generally and more specifically Spike Milligan's later efforts to recapture the absurdity of his war service. Billany renews his attack on those works that Marxists such as

Page 7

Walter Benjamin might call 'a tool of the ruling classes' (191), but he does so in a manner more suited to the new novel's style. Thus instead of *The Trap's* polemical diatribe, there is a crazy fantasy in which the prison hut floor is transformed into the deck of the ship *Lydia*, paced up and down by Horatio Hornblower. Wimsey materialises – 'Apollo in evening dress' (Billany & Dowie 58) – as does Simon Templar, The Saint, soon afterwards. The two sleuths play out a typical set piece of expository dialogue regarding some secret documents – 'sewn into the seat of Captain Hornblower's combinations. They're in his flimsies, Wimsey' (61) – and end up blowing each other away with revolvers just as Bulldog Drummond arrives. The bodies are carried off by an earlier generation of crime fiction, Sherlock Holmes, Sexton Blake, A. J. Raffles and Fu-Manchu, while Drummond is machine-gunned by the 'perfect bunter', Jeevekins (actually Wodehouse's Jeeves), whose name Wimsey keeps getting wrong – he's only the 'help', after all – while Hornblower carries on as if nothing has happened.

The episode is funny – 'Get out you bastard, sir', cries 'Jenks' (i.e. Jeeves), as he 'fills Drummond up with lead' (62) – but its point as a miniature *Götterdämmerung* of the pantheon of recent detective heroes is clear: the scene literally clears the decks of the last remnants of Golden Age characters and attitudes that so repel Billany. At the same time, he was aware of just how popular and influential this type of literature was. Earlier in *The Cage* there is a description of the prison-hut library, including the box containing fiction:

There were *not* in this box the following books: books about Captain Hornblower, books about Lord Peter Wimsey, books about the Saint, books about Bulldog Drummond, books about My Man Jeeves. The reason why they were not in the box was that everybody wanted to read them, so there was a waiting list for them, and as soon as they came in they went out again. (33)

Here, then, may be a belated justification for Billany's own

Page 8

venture into the realm of detective fiction two years earlier. Hitherto his efforts had consisted mainly of a series of unpublished short stories and novels based on his experiences as a schoolteacher, which to a considerable extent were a means of coming to terms with his own homosexuality while affirming his political ideology (Reeves & Showan 51-70).

The Opera House Murders was conceived and written within the period of the 'Phoney War' in Autumn 1939, when Billany was looking after students from his school who had been evacuated from Hull to the East Riding countryside. He was adept at spinning stories to keep his charges amused, and so it was that Granby House where the story begins was probably based on Pockthorpe Hall where they were staying near Nafferton, while young Jack who witnesses the first murder is a tribute to a former student, Jack Crossley, to whom Billany had grown close and still wrote (Reeves & Showan 69; 72-6). Billany's biographers maintain that apart from this, 'nothing in [the novel] bears any relation to Dan's life' and that it 'is pure escapism' (76). This is certainly so of the ripping yarn of the missing one hundred thousand pounds and the series of grisly murders, suspenseful chases and thrilling fights it triggers off. The same might be said of the hero, private detective Robbie Duncan, a man of action and physical prowess and a full decade older than Billany at the time of publication. Unlike Billany, Duncan is in no doubts about his sexuality – he is portrayed as convincingly 'straight', to the extent that the *Sunday Times* reviewer believed him to be the product of 'A really first-class he-man thriller writer' (Reeves & Showan 76).¹

However, within the confines of what is also assuredly an escapist literature, and with a plot and characters that still owe much to his despised Golden Age predecessors, Billany gives his novel a particular 'spin' consistent with his socialist world-view. At the same time, *The Opera House*

Page 9

¹ Billany later seems to play on his sense of uncertainty by creating a heterosexual alter-ego, Michael Carr, to act out the barely fictionalised version of his own war experiences in his novel *The Trap*. See Skrebels 63-7 for more on this.

Murders points to the growing influence of 'the American school of tough detective fiction' on British crime writing, and the postwar refashioning of the genre such that 'the conflict between justice and the criminal was no longer seen entirely from one side' (*Oxford Companion* 270).

Billany's hero, Robbie Duncan, is unashamedly a super sleuth in the Golden Age mould, with great powers of deduction and able to talk and think his way through dangerous and baffling situations. But Billany breaks the mould, too. Firstly, Duncan has a 'new world' classlessness that permits him to associate effectively with all strata of society. Significantly, his actual social origins are not divulged in the novel, although his being sent down from college ('for grievously wounding a professor' [Billany, *It Takes a Thief* 16]), his residence at Granby House (albeit as Jack's tutor), and his knowledge and appreciation of the arts indicate some social standing – but whether inherited or earned is not specified. Secondly, not only is Duncan allowed to tell his own story, as the novel's first-person narrator, but he does so in defiance of the understatement and self-effacement associated with traditional English heroic sensibilities. Thus he is both an omniscient narrator – able, for instance, to tell us what the criminal gang does in chapter 3 following the first murder, with no explanation as to how he could possibly know these things² – and an outspoken one. His narrative is peppered with the praise thrown at him, for example: 'At the height of my career my contacts at the Yard admitted that there was only one real detective in the country' (17), and 'you excel in all things' (250); while chapter 5 is even titled 'I Move in a Mysterious Way'!

Similarly, the novel contains expert discourses – if not all by Duncan himself, then at least fully and faithfully recounted by him – at considerable, even hyperbolic, lengths on subjects such as the workings of a revolver (53-4) or of a Colles's fracture of the wrist (64-5). The method plays up to

Page 10

the elaborate technical detail – itself often the basis for that classic plot device, the 'red herring' – upon which crime fiction and its near relation, the spy thriller, rely.³ Nevertheless, *The Opera House Murders* is not a parody of detective fiction in the manner that, say, the TV show *Get Smart* or the Austin Powers films pick up on the already over-the-top aspects of James Bond and his ilk. This is not to say that Billany's novel does not have parodic elements; the criminals' car numberplate, ODD-1313, is a case in point. But 'the crucial distance' – as Brian McHale (21) says in another context – 'between the parody and the model being parodied is not scrupulously enough maintained'. In other words, Billany's work is still primarily a 'straight' crime novel, even though there is much about it that constitutes a reworking of the genre.

Part of this reworking involves making Duncan a platform for Billany's own ideologies, to counter the implicit middle- and upper- class ideology he perceives in the conventional detective genre. Thus, in relating his own fall from grace into criminality (itself an unusual thing for a detective hero at that point – although there had been precedents in, for example, E. W. Hornung's *Raffles* and Maurice Leblanc's *Arsène Lupin*), Duncan sounds like a precursor of the narrator of Billany's much more politicised novel to come, *The Trap*:

In this land of free thought nobody takes the least exception to your believing that the capitalist system works unfairly. You can draw whatever morals you like from Lord Blank's luxury yacht on the one hand, and an underfed schoolchild's free bottle of milk on the other. When you

Page 11

² This could be a slip-up on Billany's part, of course. Nevertheless, it is consistent with helping to build up a sense of Duncan's perspicacity.

³ This fascination for detail carries over into the mundane as well as the technical, sometimes to the level of unconscious self-parody. See, for example, Kingsley Amis's witty and insightful overview of Ian Fleming's obsession with the naming of objects – brand names in particular – in the James Bond books (1965, pp. 99-103). Amis says that Fleming 'is purveying snobbery' because these objects '*confer status*' (1965, p. 99, original italics), but the habit smacks equally of the anally retentive.

see the queue at the Labour Exchange, you can think just what you like about Lord Bonehead's town house, and Lord Bonehead's country house, and Lord Bonehead's fleet of Rolls-Royces – so long as you only think it. Far be it from our benevolent rulers to put fetters on the spirit – they can't anyhow. It's when you come to translate your theories about property into practice that you encounter opposition. (Billany, *It Takes a Thief* 17)

Even this passage, however, indicates that the social commentary, while acerbic enough, is by no means as po-faced and preachy as it sometimes appears in the later novel, and indeed for the most part is worked into the plot and narrative rather effectively. For example, when Duncan climbs the walls of a row of 'typical slum houses' to sneak into the deserted opera house of the book's title, he notes how most of the yards are taken up with 'the coalhouse and the privy' (293). He cannot resist playing upon the gentle writer/gentle reader relationship later savaged in *The Trap*: 'so far, readers will be interested to learn, society permits the lower classes these luxuries' (293).

That Billany was developing a deftness with the classical dictum of 'delightful instruction' can be seen in an earlier episode, when what at first looks like a Robert Burton-esque digression into the topic of 'the advantages of specialization'⁴, becomes both a vehicle for furthering the plot *and* for political satire:

I thought of Stevenson, Houdini, all sorts of people, some of them doing the strangest and most difficult things, conjurors who make you believe they are sawing a woman in two, Prime Ministers who make you believe they are not sawing a

Page 12

country in two – marvels of specialization[.] (216)

This in turn leads to some ruminations on the special skills of the criminal gang, who are able to abduct Duncan in the middle of a city in broad daylight, and then to his own specialization as a detective, and the dire consequences this will have for the gang.

This conceit on 'specialization' is itself part of a more subtle manifestation of Billany's ideology in the novel. This is difficult to encapsulate in one term, but has a close affinity with the Marxist concept of cultural materialism. Later, in *The Cage*, one of Billany's two alter-egos in the novel evokes Marx through a version of the famous statement from the Theses on Feuerbach: 'Philosophers interpret the world, but it is also necessary to change it' (Billany & Dowie 181). Here, says Alan Munton (59), its authors 'were trying to relate their concern with subjectivity to Marx's similar concern: the Theses argue the primacy of "sensuous human activity" and the social construction of the subject'. Postmodernist critics such as J.-F. Lyotard point to the so-called 'grand narratives', the 'all-embracing, totalizing systems of belief' (Hawthorn 96) involving questions of ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion and socio-economic status as the chief means by which our subjectivity is socially constructed. The discourse of class is, of course, one of those grand narratives, and according to Billany literature is complicit in that discourse: it 'needs leisure, and therefore has been written for the leisured classes', consequently it 'has made the working class a convention' (*Trap* 26). Interestingly, he draws no distinction between the supposedly 'high art' and 'popular' genres; as we have seen, for him mainstream detective fiction was as culpable in reinforcing the discursive construction of class roles as any of the more elitist forms of literary practice.

In pausing to reflect upon the special skills involved in crime and crime-busting, Billany/Duncan focuses on the world of the detective novel as a world of work – of physical and mental labour and of labour relations – as well as of the more

Page

13

⁴ Robert Burton's famous treatise, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1st edn 1621), is replete with 'digressions' on various topics which are themselves cleverly integrated devices for diverting the reader from his/her own melancholy self-preoccupation.

abstract characteristics such as evil, heroism, virtuosity and serendipity around which the standard detective fiction plot is formulated. Perhaps the most obvious index of the labour involved in 'crime work' is the injury and death suffered and inflicted by those involved, and certainly one of the more startling aspects of *The Opera House Murders* is its refusal to gloss over the physical circumstances of either. Thus, for example, Duncan may be a super-sleuth, but he also spends a good deal of the novel in pain. His jaw is broken by a knuckle-dustered thug quite early in the story, and is so heavily wired up that he has to communicate with the other characters by writing or by sign language. Kidnapped by the gang and bashed over the head with a hammer, he bounces around on the floor of their car for miles pretending to be unconscious. He has a finger shot off in a gun battle, which adds to the difficulties of climbing a rope into the opera house, after having put his foot into a rat-trap – 'It nearly crippled me' (*It Takes a Thief* 294). Indeed, pain and suffering are such recurring motifs in the plot that the local GP, Dr Martin, has a significant, if supportive, role to play: caring for Jack who nearly dies of fever after fainting out of the tree where he witnessed the first murder; tending to Duncan's frequent injuries; caring for the shocked wife and mother of Jack's older brother, Horace, who is brutally murdered with a blow to the head by a golf-club; and generally getting on with his own specialised form of work.

The key feature of any murder mystery is, obviously, death, and Billany seems hell-bent on confronting the reader with that fact at a level at times approaching a heightened reality. The first death occurs in the opening chapter in grim detail – the victim's head is cracked open with a hammer and he is run over several times by a car – the horror enhanced by a narrative style that contrasts the child Jack's innocent perspective with the ghastliness he witnesses, rather like a Secret Seven mystery gone terribly wrong. Other killings follow, none of which is allowed to pass without some reminder of the material circumstances accompanying death, but none, surely, as hideous as the one that Duncan himself inflicts on

Page 14

Frank, a gang member, as he escapes capture. For a full page Duncan strangles the life out of another human being:

My thumbs were low down in that unprotected hollow under the larynx; they went deep in, so that my thumbnails burst the skin of his throat, and blood spurted down my thumbs. At the same moment his mouth shot open to its fullest extent, and his tongue thrust quiveringly out; his face became a mass of agonized wrinkles, particularly his forehead, which contracted like four or five horizontal rolls of flesh. His round eyes started from his head like two big marbles; sweat broke out in beads on his forehead, and his face turned grey-blue. (226)

And so on until Frank dies in agony.

Clearly there is an element of *grand guignol* here, but the shock value should also be seen as part of a broader twofold project. First is a reintegration of what Ernest Mandel terms the 'marginal' world of Golden Age detective fiction – a world of 'drawing rooms, country houses, millionaires' mansions and boards of directors offices' where the crimes 'become shadowy, abstract, and make-believe' – into a 'dangerous' world of 'real criminals' and 'real crime' (27). Second, and congruent with the first, is an attempt to restore what Michael Taussig, taking his cue from Marx and Benjamin, calls the 'interpersonal labor-contact and sensuous interaction with the world' that gets 'erased' when 'the social character of men's [sic] labor' is turned into 'commodity fetishism' (22-3). The classic detective story is a particularly fetishised form of fiction, produced for consumption by the leisured classes, and Mandel makes a telling observation about the 'conventionalized system of crime and punishment' that operates within the genre:

The key ... is neither ethics, nor pity, nor understanding, but the formal proof of guilt, which will, in turn, lead to verdict of 'guilty' by the jury. The abstract, rational character of the plot, the crime, and the exposure of the criminal make the

Page 15

classic detective story, even more than its nineteenth-century forerunners, the epitome of bourgeois rationality in literature. Formal logic rules supreme. Crime and its unmasking are like supply and demand in the market place: abstract absolute laws almost completely alienated from real human beings and the clashes of real human passions. (Mandel 26-7)

If, as Mandel maintains, the 'real problem of the classical detective novel' is actually mystery – 'the only irrational factor that bourgeois rationality cannot eliminate' (27) – then Billany's focus on violence and death helps to offset that preoccupation somewhat. In fact, for most of the novel discovering the identity of the 'third party' and the whereabouts of the hidden money is less about solving a mystery than the sheer physical, mental and emotional effort involved in the process (as in the detailed description of uncovering the money in the chapter with the topical title, 'Dig for Victory'). Billany thus gives back to the world of the detective novel some of its original physical substance by reincorporating it into the wider world of work, with all its attendant expenditure of blood, sweat and tears. And if his efforts to rework the genre seem also a case of misspent energy, we need reminding of the place of the artist in the Marxist scheme of things, and the potential inherent in 'mimesis' – the capacity for fictionalising or 'othering' – for 'opening up new possibilities for exploring reality and providing means for changing culture and society along with those possibilities' (Taussig 23). Golden Age detective stories were informed by and in turn reinforced a world of bourgeois social relationships. One way of countering their effect would, for the Marxist writer, involve intervening in the process of circulation that is crime and punishment, and the writing and reading about crime and punishment, through a mode of detective fiction where the labour involved, and the world in which it operates, is reasserted and reassessed.

Unfortunately, Billany would have no further opportunities to infiltrate the world of the detective novel. Although he wrote a follow-up Robbie Duncan mystery called *A Bell*

Page 16

Shall Ring during his military training in England, the manuscript was rejected by Fabers. It nevertheless elicited a letter from the company's most famous director, T. S. Eliot, who regretted that in

the later part of the book ... the characters lose their human reality: especially Robbie himself, whose somewhat lawless but very attractive personality added so much to the Opera House. (Reeves & Showan 82)

Clearly Billany had been onto something in tackling the genre, if his efforts could lead even the conservative Eliot to declare that 'if and when' Billany had the time to continue the Duncan series while doing his military service, 'I shall be ready to push you to it with all the encouragement in my vocabulary' (82). Billany began a third Duncan novel while sailing to North Africa in 1942, to be called either *Whispering* or *The Young Lady's Hand* (92), but the rigours of overseas service and his eventual capture prevented its completion. According to his biography, 'The unfinished manuscript which eventually found its way back to the Billany family shows the same racy style of his earlier work' (93).⁵

Life as a prisoner-of-war seems to have directed his attention to more serious social writing, but whether he would have resumed his crime writing career after the war remains a moot point. For some time he, like his hero Robbie Duncan, had lived something of a charmed life, evading death and serious injury, but he was eventually lost to the world of detective fiction altogether when he – together with David Dowie – disappeared in Italy after his release from the POW camp at Rezzanello sometime in late 1943. (As a final irony, the circumstances surrounding their disappearance and the postwar efforts to discover their fate read like a mystery story of its own). Despite the scorn he expressed for the genre in his writings as a POW, there is no question that his one

Page 17

⁵ In fact, Billany wrote a further four short stories and a radio play featuring Robbie Duncan. None of the stories was published or the play produced, although the manuscripts remain in the Billany family archive.

contribution to it deserves to be remembered. *The Opera House Murders*, a well-crafted and enjoyable novel in its own right, is historically significant in that it points to the more gritty, American-influenced 'gumshoe' novels of the postwar years, and demonstrates that even supposedly escapist modes of literature can open up fields of textual play in which the politically committed writer can operate.

Works Cited

- Amis, Kingsley. *The James Bond Dossier*. London: Jonathon Cape, 1965.
- Benjamin, Walter. 'Theses on the Philosophy of History.' *Revolutions of the Word*. Ed. Patricia Ward. London: Arnold, 1997.
- Billany, Dan. *It Takes a Thief*. New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1941. (originally published 1940 as *The Opera House Murders*).
- Billany, Dan. *The Trap*. 1950. London: Faber & Faber, 1986.
- Billany, Dan, and David Dowie. *The Cage*, London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1949.
- Mandel, Ernest. *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story*. London: Pluto Press, 1984.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1987.
- Munton, Alan. *English Fiction of the Second World War*. London: Faber and Faber, 1989.
- The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. 5th edn. Ed. Margaret Drabble. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985.

Page 18

- Reeves, Valerie A. and Valerie Showan. *Dan Billany: Hull's Lost Hero*. Kingston upon Hull: Kingston Press, 1999.
- Skrebels, Paul. 'Between the Real and the Really Made UP': Mimetic Strategies in Dan Billany's Wartime Novel *The Trap*.' *Precursors and Aftermaths: Literature in English 1914-1945* 2.1 (2004): 55-73.
- Taussig, Michael. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. New York and London: Routledge, 1993.

Page 19