

Eric Ambler

GRAHAM GREENE called Eric Ambler "unquestionably our finest thriller writer". He was certainly the founding father of the modern genre, whose books have had a seminal influence on all writers in the field since.

He came to a world dominated by Sapper and John Buchan, whose heroes were invariably muscular males of right-wing views who were busy defending the British Empire against the Bolsheviks. With the five books after *The Dark Frontier* - which first appeared in 1936 - Ambler rewrote the conventions of the spy thriller, presenting the hero as an ambiguous, often shabby figure, forced to live in a world of shifting allegiances rather than black-and-white certainties, someone like an engineer or commercial photographer who becomes entangled in international conspiracy through no fault of their own.

For the first time in thrillers, Marxist characters appeared who were plausible, interesting human beings, not Aunt Sallies, and they often occupied positions in the narrative structures that drew readers' sympathy towards them, so the real contemporary enemy of Fascism replaced the cardboard stereotypes set up by his predecessors.

Ambler was born in 1909 in London, into a warm, rather disorganised theatrical family who lived in Woolwich, and led an uncertain existence touring the music halls with a marionette show. A clever scholarship boy, he was educated in LCC schools, an environment perhaps closest to the world of H.G. Wells, popular, practical, cheerful, with a strong belief in progress and science. He flourished, to the extent that he won the top scholarship offered to study engineering at what is now the City University, after his parents had told him that they were unable to afford to pay his fees.

But he was already developing an interest in literature and after a reading of William Archer's *Playmaking*, decided to become a dramatist in his spare time. A long stage-struck period followed, when he was, like Donne, a "great frequenter of plays", and played truant from his engineering studies to go to endless shows to the extent that he knew Ben Travers's *A Cuckoo in the Nest* off by heart without ever having opened the script.

The wider world soon began to affect him, though: the rifle club he belonged to was involved in helping the police during the 1926 General Strike, an event he always claimed was his first political awakening, and job prospects were worsening in electrical engineering companies in Britain. He abandoned his degree course, and took a job he was offered as a technical trainee at the Swan Edison company at Ponders End. He enjoyed the practical hurly-burly of industry but he had not forgotten his

literary ambitions and he started, but did not finish, a novel called *The Co-median*, mostly about his father.

Writing got a further boost when, in 1930, his job seemed likely to disappear with the merger of the Edison company into what is now part of GEC, and through luck and knowing the right girl, he moved to become an advertising copywriter in a fledgling London agency.

This move was of great importance; it took him out of the restricted intellectual orbit of provincial business and brought him to central London. It also meant the discovery of Europe; as he pointed out himself, "I learned the smells to be encountered on the way; that of the Newhaven-Dieppe cross-channel steamer, the Gard du Nord in Paris, the Gare de l'Est (quite different), Basle, the Baden-Bahnhof, Freiburg-im-Breisgau, a mountain cable-car terminus..."

In an important sense, he was entering the world he was to make his own later on: the world of badly lit stations, trains that might, or might not, cross dangerous frontiers, strange passengers who could draw the unwary into sinister labyrinths.

He had also started to make useful literary and artistic acquaintances, such as the artist John French, a fellow copywriter, who took him to Italy, not just the usual liberating experience for Anglo-Saxon intellectuals in the aesthetic sense, but a direct education in the realities of Fascism and Mussolini. The growing atmosphere of tension and menace from this direction seems to have acted as a stimulus for him to give the necessary time and energy to his writing to produce something substantial, along with an important relationship, with Betty Dyson, the bohemian daughter of the *Daily Herald* cartoonist Will Dyson. She was, according to one of her obituary writers, "a girl of strange decisions and loose morals", but she had a large and cosmopolitan literary acquaintance and reinforced his sense of creative identity at a crucial time.

When he turned to thriller writing, he thought that most, if not all, of what was on the bookshelves was awful. The particular problem of the implausible leftist villains became more acute when judged against the real monstrosities in central Europe. But as soon as he started writing, it was clear that Ambler's books were going to be much more than politically different, but innovative in the style and approach to the writing. In the first, *The Dark Frontier* (1936), he used his scientific interests to make a story that brilliantly anticipated the threat of the atomic bomb, having one made by a group of Balkan scientists working for Fascists wanting world domination.

The narrative was in part a parody of the courtly superhero tales of E. Phillips Oppenheim, part a Jungian fantasy based on the idea



Ambler (centre) at the film premiere of *The Cruel Sea* (1953), with its star Jack Hawkins (left) and the novel's author Nicholas Monsarrat Hulton Getty

of dual personality. Although it creaks today, it has a pure Thirties period flavour, and in important technical set pieces shows Ambler's mastery of writing action, the car chase in particular. After its publication by Hodder and Stoughton, he studied Somerset Maugham's Ashenden spy stories, and wrote *Uncommon Danger* (1937, published in the US as *Background to Danger*), in which he combined a narrative of hypnotic, driving force with a lot of real life details from anti-Fascist refugees he had met in Paris. This research technique became central to Ambler's

Daily Express, bringing his name for the first time before a mass audience.

Its successor, *Cause for Alarm*, probably the classic expose of the arms dealing business, was entirely written in France, and by the end of 1938 Ambler had become a completely European writer in spirit, with the basic struggle between goodies and baddies being played out on a European stage, and a diminishing minority of the characters being English.

The culmination of his achievement in this period was *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1939), where

time. In one sense, it is a very traditional book that owes more to predecessors than Ambler may have realised. After all, Dimitrios as a symbol of the threat from the Levant is not very different from Buchan's Greenmantle as a symbol of expanding Islam, but the process of representation in the two books is exactly opposite, for Ambler spends his time demystifying history and making it explicable, whereas Buchan creates a largely mythological figure outside it.

In 1940 Ambler returned to Britain from America, just as *Journey into*

screenplays, *The Cruel Sea*, in particular, which was released as a film in 1953.

He resumed thriller-writing with *Judgement on Deltchev* in 1951, a book he later described as an "anti-Stalinist socialist novel" and books followed every two or three years until the late Seventies, but although they contain some very distinguished work, particularly with *The Schirmer Inheritance* in 1953, and *The Levanter* in 1972, his output sometimes lacked the earlier sense of the main currents of international politics of the time being condensed into a particular story and set of characters.

He is at his best when hypnotic tension erupts into sudden action, and the later books do not have the same sense of overpowering tension as the early work. His disillusionment with Stalinism and the hope of human progress that it once represented for him left him with a too overwhelming concentration on the seedy, cynical side of the modern world.

It is important to note how few of his characters were Russian or American, and what little interest he had in the Cold War. He never descended to the anti-Communist simplicities of writers like Ian Fleming, and his genuine depth of scientific knowledge left him with little time for the gadgetry of a lot of modern thrillers. In the post-war world he became a lonely figure in some ways, assisted by the contempt he was held in by some erstwhile admirers. He loved to tell the story of how, after *Judgement on Deltchev* was published, the lady who used to deliver the *Daily Worker* to his London

and he received threatening mail and obscene junk through the post.

Exile was probably inevitable, and he lived for many years in Switzerland. In his personal life he was a warm, charming man, an expert observer of all sorts of people, and someone who rather belied the publishers' image of the remote elusive figure who resembled some of the characters in his novels. He was well aware of how much he had achieved in his youth, and his ruthlessly clear brain led him to reject endless appeals from publishers and film producers to produce "another Dimitrios".

He knew there was no need for one, and when he returned to London near the end of his life to live as a full-time resident in the city of his birth he seemed a happy, fulfilled elderly man, someone who at the age of 80 would take a childlike delight in being flown first class across the Atlantic on Concorde to attend a re-union of the Office of Strategic Services, forerunners of the CIA. But he was too honest a man to disguise his one connected hatred, that of airports. When we think of Ambler, we think of trains, not very clean carriages, an unshaven man opposite, reading a newspaper printed in a language we cannot understand. Heathrow cannot compete.

JAMES PETTIFER

Eric Ambler, writer: born London 28 June 1909; OBE 1981; married 1939 Louise Crombie (marriage dissolved 1958); 1958 Joan Harrison (died 1994); died London 23 October 1998.

On discovering Europe in the 1930s he entered the world he was to make his own: the world of badly lit stations, trains that might, or might not, cross dangerous frontiers, strange

method at the time, with Turkish exiles in Montparnasse providing the seed corn for his masterpiece, *The Mask of Dimitrios*, written two years later.

At the same time he made the acquaintance of Stephen Spender and became very close to the Communist Party, although he never actually joined it, spending most of his time in France. Material success began to come along, especially after he was taken up as a discovery by his American publisher, Alfred Knopf, and a following book, *Epitaph for a Spy* (1938), was serialised in the

crisis of contemporary Europe was traced back, by means of the search of the detective story writer Latimer for the master criminal Dimitrios, to the disaster in modern Greek history in Smyrna in 1922, when the city was retaken by the Turks and burnt to the ground. It was, and is, an obscure event most English language readers had never heard of, but intimately linked with the crisis of democracy in that part of the world.

In the brilliantly constructed plot, he catches precisely the sense of paranoia and looming, all-embracing evil that was current at the

Fear was being published, and he volunteered to join the Army. After a number of vicissitudes he found himself working with Carol Reed, Peter Ustinov, John Huston and other later luminaries in the Eighth Army film unit in Italy, and he ended the war as Assistant Director of the Army School for Cinematography.

He fell foul of the military authorities by speaking out against the installation of ex-Fascists to run Italian cities, in preference to Communist-led partisans who had actually liberated them, and left for America, writing a number of highly successful