

Kestner, Joseph A.: *The Edwardian Detective, 1901-1915*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2000. ISBN: 1-84014-607-9; 416 S.

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Which images come up in your mind when you think of Sherlock Holmes rescuing Sir Henry from the deadly attack of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, of Davies and Carruthers solving *The Riddle of the Sands*, of the Roman Catholic priest enforcing God's law with *The Innocence of Father Brown*, or of other protagonists of British detective fiction of the early twentieth century such as Romney Pringle, Addington Peace or Lady Molly? The juxtaposition of good and evil, detective and malefactor? The ingenious sleuth who hunts down even the most cunning criminal? The harnessing of science in surveillance and the re-establishment of law and order? The unveiling of an artful plan to invade British shores? The priest-detective who, figuratively speaking, enters the criminal's mind to facilitate detection? You may have all this on your mind and even a few images more. However, it is only after having read this perspicacious study of a selection of Edwardian detective stories that you will grasp the diversity of allusions, images, and cultural cross-references to be detected in the literature.

Some thirty novels or collections of stories published between 1901 and 1915 have been studied in order to examine the dimensions of the period's culture. Each of them displays key traits, cultural problems and conflicts of the age that have found their way into a genre that deals with more than policing, order, law and justice. Other genres have impinged upon early twentieth-century detective stories such as the invasion scare literature which started to become popular after the publication of *The Battle of Dorking* in 1871. In fact, seeing the wealth of issues that have found their way into the texts one can easily see that Joseph Kestner's claim for a reappraisal of this genre, its canonical as well as its non-canonical examples (p. 25), is a valid one. With a focus on cultural - embracing political and social - institutions, beliefs and practices his analysis offers an evaluation, in several cases a re-evaluation of

detective literature, which brings back many ideas and concepts prevalent at the time. Given the social background of the authors, the views communicated by the characters and the plot to a contemporary readership were mainly those of the British middle classes.

Some historians have been loathe to call the years from the death of Queen Victoria to the First World War an age in its own right¹. Rather, they have dealt with the period as an aftermath of or echo to the Victorian age, some, as they looked back on it with the experience of the trenches on their mind, idealised the years' atmosphere in the image of a „long garden party“ that seemed to belong more to the nineteenth than to the „modern“ twentieth century. Do the years following the turn of the century possess a distinctive character? Can the detective fiction of the time be taken as distinctive, different from late Victorian and post-war writings? As the book's title suggests, Kestner answers both questions in the affirmative, and he proves his case convincingly. In fact, he does his part of hunting down, in his case of the „Edwardian detective“, quite impressively. When he dubs the decade and a half up to the Great War „Edwardian“, he follows historians such as Donald Read, Samuel Hynes and Walter Arnstein.² They have done much to point to characteristics and establish the era firmly as one of its own.³

The early twentieth-century was a time of doubt, anxiety, and unrest for Britain. The atmosphere of uncertainty pervading the culture intensified the people's need to have order, control and stability enforced wherever they seemed weakened or, if only temporarily, suspended. Issues of British leadership in international affairs, particularly colonial affairs, the growing competition from the

¹ Cf. Robert Ensor, *Oxford History of England. England 1870-1914*, Oxford 1936; Richard Shannon, *The Crisis of Imperialism, 1865-1915*, New York 1978, E.J. Feuchtwanger, *Democracy and Empire: Britain 1865-1914*, London 1987.

² Donald Read, *The Age of Urban Democracy: England 1868-1914*, London 1994, Simon Nowell-Smith (Ed.), *Edwardian England 1901-1914*, London 1966, Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, Princeton, N.J. 1968.

³ The Edwardian age came to an end, as Donald Read has convincingly argued, not in August 1914, but a few months later with the beginning of 'total war'.

United States and from Germany, the rising Anglo-German antagonism, economic dependence, race degeneration, the fear of terrorism, the implications of science and technology, the nature of women and their place within the political system, the ideal of British manhood and the dangers to it, the consequences of materialism for the culture and for human relationships were some of the central questions that were widely discussed. Politics looked more and more like the arena of „the Great Unrest“, even more so since the fight for women suffrage came to be fought with increasing militancy - a militancy hitherto unknown -, and since more and more workers decided to participate in one of the great industrial strikes between 1910 and 1914, supposedly aiming at an overthrow of the social order. No wonder members of the Edwardian middle and upper classes looked towards the future with apprehension.

The sense of disturbing change is exhibited in many Edwardian texts and most strongly in the genre that concentrates on the - real or imagined - dangers to the status quo of male, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class cultural control, i.e. detective fiction. Where Victorian detectives had moved on firm ground, their Edwardian successors very often tiptoed on thin ice. The sleuth could apply science in order to achieve his aim, but so could the criminal. The one who outwitted the evil-doers could even be a criminal himself, just like the protagonist and gentleman rogue of *The Adventures of Romney Pringle*. The Edwardian detective genre brought it home to its readers: In politics, society, culture nothing was static or unchangeable, dangers were lurking everywhere, without and, what was even more unsettling, within.

Kestner arranges his material chronologically into an early-Edwardian (1901-1905), late-Edwardian (1906-1910) and early Georgian (1911-1915) type of detective fiction, starting out with Arthur Conan Doyle's *Hound of the Baskervilles* and ending up with John Buchan's *Thirty-Nine Steps*. Though one may easily agree with the text analysis - which is full of insights -, readers may not be as willing to share the author's views on the existence of three different phases with three distinctive types of detective literature. The landsli-

de victory of the Liberals and their takeover of power in 1906 certainly changed politics and the overall atmosphere after some time. The death of Edward VII and the beginning of the reign of George V did mark an end and a beginning in a sense, but in another it did not, in so far as most of the same values, patterns of behaviour continued to influence people's lives just like before. When you compare the texts published in the first half of Edward's reign to those of the second you will find that many traits of the stories by Conan Doyle, Childers or Freeman and Pitcairn lived on. The study leads to the fact that the way certain issues were treated in the genre changed throughout the period. To name but a few: anxiety as to women's roles increased, so did the sense of foreboding, in contrast to this, the fear of American heiresses - and with them American materialism - invading the British aristocracy diminished towards the end of the Edwardian age. It is a pity that Kestner in his conclusion does not offer a summary of those changes. It would have aptly rounded off this insightful exposition of some of the most prominent elements of Edwardian Zeitgeist.

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