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Peter Fleming's pathology

by *D. J. Taylor*

A review of *Master of Deception: The Wartime Adventures of Peter Fleming* by Alan Ogden

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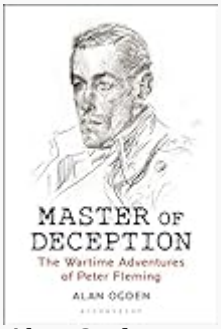

Alan Ogden

Master of Deception: The Wartime Adventures of Peter Fleming

Bloomsbury Academic, 352 pages, $27.00

The funniest, and by some way most characteristic, story about Peter Fleming (1907–71) has our man turning up at the Garrick Club in central London sometime in the 1950s clad in full evening dress: white tie, tailcoat, and row of miniature medals. What was he doing togged up like that, an acquaintance duly inquired. "Got to help a friend give a hot meal to the Queen," the middle-aged exquisite calmly returned. In strict demographic terms, Fleming was an extreme version of a very common type of mid-twentieth-century upper-class Englishman, the type who takes one of the behavioral stanchions of his caste—in this case personal reserve—and converts it into a kind of supercharged variant of the original. To his membership of every top-grade national institution worth the name—Eton; Christ Church, Oxford; the Brigade of Guards; the Country Landowner's Association—could be added a taciturnity so paralyzing that even similarly buttoned-up convives reeled despairingly in its wake.

Anthony Powell, whose war-era novels Fleming read in proof to corroborate abstruse points of military detail, left a judicious paragraph or two in *Faces in My Time* (1980) about his friend's

obsession with not being seen to "show off," a fixation so profound, Powell thought, that it might almost have been a form of ostentation in itself. The diary-compiling Powell of the later 1980s was a bit less charitable. "What a pompous ass Peter was, tho' I liked him." In a world of silent pipe-chewers, studious chit-chat avoiders, and solitary non-conversationalists, Fleming, it seems clear, was in a class of his own.

As you might imagine, the reek of class hangs heavy over any account of Peter's career. Though nothing could have been more aristocratic than the circumstances of his early life, the Flemings were essentially parvenus, one of those no-nonsense, go-getting Victorian families in which the grandfather makes the money, the son consolidates the social position, and the grandchildren strike out into newfangled cultural territory from which their forebears would have instantly recoiled. Robert Fleming was a self-made businessman from Dundee whose activities in the late-Victorian City of London were so successful that he was able to present his heir, Valentine, with the twenty-first birthday gift of a quarter of a million pounds. Val, a Tory MP and friend of Winston Churchill, died in the Great War (Churchill wrote an admiring *Times* obituary invoking the figurative spectacle of "a well-loved city whose lights, which burn so bright, which burn so true, are extinguished in the distance, one by one"), leaving four sons to be brought up by his rackety and flamboyant widow, Eve. In *Peter Fleming* (1974), the only full-length biography to date, Duff Hart-Davis preserves the polite fiction that Eve had adopted the baby girl named Amaryllis who arrived unexpectedly in the family in 1926, but the reality was that Mrs. Fleming had tumbled into bed with her serial portraitist Augustus John.

"What a pompous ass Peter was, tho' I liked him."

The fraternal quartet included Robert, who joined the family bank, Michael, who was to die in World War II, and Ian, who went on to write the James Bond books. Peter, the oldest, acquired fame as a traveler in exotic climes. *Brazilian Adventure* (1933), *One's Company* (1934), which was an account of a trip to China, and *News from Tartary* (1936), the record of a seven-month forced march across Central Asia, were not only prodigious best-sellers but also managed to establish their author's reputation on cross-generational lines. If younger readers approved of the glamour and the modestly conveyed fortitude of his travelogues, then their parents relished the sense of a throwback to a bygone era: a straight-jawed, clean-living gentleman-explorer out of G. A. Henty or H. Rider Haggard. There is a faint echo of him in Powell's *What's Become of Waring* (1939) as the intrepid travel writer "T. T. Waring" ("He was compared with everyone who had ever written a successful travel book, Burton, Doughty, Hudson, and the rest of them"), although Waring, unlike Fleming, is exposed as a stay-at-home fraud. By 1938, married to the actress Celia Johnson—later to be nominated for an Oscar for her role in *Brief Encounter* (1946)—and hotly tipped as next-but-one editor of the *Times*, Fleming was installed in Merrimoles House on a two-thousand-acre estate in Oxfordshire given to him by his uncle Phil. As well as furnishing him with a home and the occupation of a country squire, the locale also gave him the chance to indulge the great hobby of his life. This, it seems fair to say, was

killing things.

Even Alan Ogden's Master of Deception, a punctilious and notably well-researched account of Fleming's military career, can't quite ignore the altogether exceptional havoc that its subject wreaked on the fauna of the United Kingdom (and other places) during his five decades or so behind a rifle sight.1 For all the talk of foreign travel, "it was the countryside of the British Isles with its many rural delights that continued to captivate him," Ogden writes,

> whether shooting pheasants at Merrimoles on misty late autumn days or grouse on Scottish hillsides in the height of summer. This was the landscape where he found the freedom he so loved, the land of the rook rifle, a place where nature held no truck with his pet hates of cant, red tape and hypocrisy.

Similarly, Hart-Davis's *Peter Fleming*, on one level a conventional enough literary biography, is, on another, simply a catalogue of carnage: the 547 pheasants, for example, that a team of seven guns (including King George VI) brought down at St Paul's Walden in November 1947, or the 1,400 birds dispatched in a pre-war shoot at Bromsden Farm. When the King died, in February 1952, Fleming's diary tribute was merely that of the admiring fellow hobbyist: "I think he was a very good, but probably not a great, shot. He absolutely loved shooting."

In fairness to Fleming, he was aware of what to anyone beyond the somewhat sequestered world of field sports might seem an incongruity: that a man who devotes large parts of his existence to conserving the countryside—no developer was allowed anywhere near the Nettlebed estate on which Merrimoles sat—and often talks with more enthusiasm about individual breeds of birds than his own closest friends (the "charming and mysterious" woodcock and so on) should spend so much of it slaughtering the non-human inhabitants. Hart-Davis quotes a paragraph from an unpublished essay that touches on this faint unease—it was never anything so definite as guilt—where Fleming notes that "the surroundings in which the hunter plays his part cannot alter the fact that his purpose is primitive and cruel; but they lend, as they have always lent, a redeeming touch of the aesthetic to a basically barbarous activity." That said, shooting may also have allowed him to satisfy one of his most basic requirements, which was the need for non-human companionship. As Hart-Davis remarks, he found it far easier to achieve satisfactory relationships with dogs: they were loyal and attentive and didn't answer back.

Fleming's war travels were every bit as far-flung and hair-raising as his pre-war tours of China. They began with a role in the disastrous Norway campaign of 1940: the dispatches he brought back are thought to have hastened Prime Minister Chamberlain's resignation. Significantly, Fleming disliked Chamberlain, whom he had met at a house party in the early months of the war, not only for his lackluster military strategy but also for being a feeble shot and not looking the part. ("He is slow and tends to let birds pass before him before he fires. He looks every inch the townsman in his rusty tweeds, handling his gun a trifle gawkishly.") Subsequently, he trained a team of guerrilla fighters in Kent with the aim of delaying a possible post-invasion Nazi advance. A visiting dignitary described the hollowed-out badger's sett beneath the forest floor that made do as an operational base as "pure *Boy's Own Paper* stuff." There were later missions to mainland Greece,

Crete, Cairo, India, Burma, and China. While always happy to risk his neck at moments of crisis—he was lucky to escape when the ship in which he was retreating from Greece suffered a direct hit—Fleming made a speciality of intelligence work, specifically deception: the burned-out jeep with the bundle of forged plans in the front seat designed to frustrate the Japanese advance; the carefully abandoned haversack full of misleading information; the Women's Auxiliary Air Force member in the Allied Commander Lord Mountbatten's HQ in Ceylon instructed to write letters about spurious troop movements to a non-existent boyfriend in the hope that they would be steamed open by enemy agents.

As for the military environment that Fleming found himself in between his re-enlistment in the Grenadier Guards in 1939 and his eventual demobilization seven years later, it takes only a chapter of Master of Deception to establish that, if conducted at a stratospherically higher level, this was a version of Crouchback's war—as in the hero of Evelyn Waugh's Sword of Honour trilogy. The foreign trips invariably begin with sit-downs in gentlemen's clubs where the vis-à-vis is urged to "come to Norway," the officer's messes are full of people remembered from college or professional life, and scarcely a rock on the Cretan mountainside fails to conceal a chap one messed with at Eton. There is a literal connection, too, for in the Norwegian campaign Fleming served as aide-de-camp to the legendary one-eyed, one-armed, death-defying General Adrian Carton de Wiart, the model for Waugh's Brigadier Ben Ritchie-Hook, who returns from a raid on the African coast with a sentry's severed head. Here the real-life de Wiart confines himself to marching off with unimaginable sangfroid through a village being obliterated by Heinkel bombers in search of rations. "Better get rid of those egg-shells," he instructs Fleming on his return; "Don't want the place in a mess."

Fleming admired de Wiart, whose biography he mysteriously failed to complete, and was admired by him in return. Meanwhile, Ogden's account of Fleming's time in Greece emphasizes just how closely he and his fellow soldiers share some of the attitudes quietly on display in *Men at Arms*, *Officers and Gentlemen*, and *Unconditional Surrender*. There is, for example, the undisguised contempt for foreigners. General de Wiart complains of "Damn Frogs—they're all the same. One bang and they're off." "The retreat of the Greek Army was greatly retarded by the universal custom of jumping out of your lorry and running 300 yards if you or one of your friends heard an aeroplane," Fleming adds to the charge sheet. Like Waugh, he is no fan of the Royal Air Force, routinely describing its representatives as "mongrels" and remarking of the raf men attached to the party during the retreat from Greece that "they all flap and gas and give a sorry exhibition." As for our allies in the Far East, South West Pacific Command offered a nasty shock:

> It was purely American. Such diplomatic qualities as broadminded and urban outlook, tolerance and sense of compromise are rare outside a few carefully selected and highly trained public servants and statesmen. Military commanders and staff officers are in general somewhat nationalistic, narrow and bigoted.

And, the implication goes, not gentlemen.

On his demob from the army, Fleming declined the offer of a safe Conservative seat in parliament, detached himself from the *Times* hierarchy, and spent the last quarter century of his life managing his estate and, after a slow start, writing best-selling works of popular history. It was almost as if a part of him realized that the world he had strode through so blithely in the 1930s was dead. "You're the flower of England's youth," one of Crouchback's friends observes in *Men at Arms*, "and it just won't do." Come the 1960s the books dried up and the silences grew louder. According to Hart-Davis, who as Fleming's godson had plenty of opportunities to observe him in action, visitors to Merrimoles "could not help noticing how the house appeared to be inhabited by a collection of total strangers who scarcely spoke to each other." While it confines itself to the war years, with several diversions into wider military strategy, *Master of Deception* is, like *Peter Fleming* before it, a study in pathology.

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1 *Master of Deception: The Wartime Adventures of Peter Fleming*, by Alan Ogden; Bloomsbury Academic, 352 pages, $27.

D. J. Taylor's *Orwell: The New Life* (Pegasus) is out in May 2023.

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