

'The hero is always a suspicious character'

Eric Ambler's complete works are being reissued in revised translations. Stefan Howald went to interview him.

'I've always tried not to be too topical,' says Eric Ambler. 'That's exactly why my books have become topical.' He was never particularly interested in, for instance, spy stories set in the Cold War. He preferred to describe anti-colonial uprisings, or the life of mercenary soldiers in Africa, or the problem of the Middle East, before these themes had started to attract general interest. His early thrillers on social and ethnic conflict in the Balkans have gained in relevance over the last few years.

Born in South London in 1909, he started off as an engineer and advertising copywriter, but between 1936 and 1940 he published six thrillers which transformed the genre. The first two, *The Dark Frontier* (1936) and *Background to Danger* (1937) marked a departure from the unconvincingly patriotic heroes of existing spy thrillers and described a Europe threatened by Fascist putsches and powerful business interests. Then *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1939) captured the atmosphere of the complex interwar years with its account of the career of an opportunistic killer while at the same time posing the question to what extent it is possible to reconstruct historical truth.

His new career was temporarily interrupted by the war. Ambler served as an officer in the artillery and then as a director of army propaganda films. For a few years after 1945 he worked as a writer of film scripts in Hollywood and London. Not until 1951 did he return to writing novels. Since then, at regular intervals, he has produced a sequence of thrillers set in all the world's trouble spots, the last to date being *The Care of Time*, his eighteenth novel, published in 1981. Four years later came his ironic autobiography *Here Lies*: the title is an untranslatable play on words – untruths and gravestone inscriptions so it is changed in the German translation to *Ambler by Ambler*. His latest publication contains early stories and additional autobiographical information, plus a few vignettes of Switzerland. Since its appearance in 1993 he has fallen silent.

A few months ago, however, I read in an English weekend supplement that Eric Ambler is working on a new novel. The author of the portrait was clearly surprised and pleased. Ambler's books are unobtainable in his native England at present, except in a specialist shop in London where it is possible to track down American editions and the odd second-hand volume. By contrast the Swiss publishing house Diogenes has embarked on a new complete edition in revised translations.

For the last six years Ambler has been living in London in a quiet square behind noisy Marble

Arch. The wide, well-kept frontage of the house exudes respectability. His flat can be entered only by using a special key to unlock the lift door, which opens straight into the flat. It has an aura of mystery; you expect to find trapdoors. This arrangement is not, however, the result of any wish to shroud himself in secrecy. It's just that he is now physically frail.

He is still in full possession of his memory and command of language. His attitude to himself, too, is unchanged: he preserves an ironic distance, in the same elegant style that raises his books above the level of those of his present-day rivals. To break the ice he initially entertains me with anecdotes about a Swiss-French frontier village, dryly commenting that he is a mine of useless information. His interests still cover a wide spectrum. On the coffee table are the latest numbers of *The Spectator*, a new translation of the *mad* and a history of the Garrick Club (founded in London in 1831).

He frankly admits that he comes from an earlier period and tradition. 'I belong in the 1930s.' Politically he was deeply marked by the Spanish Civil War and fascism. 'The European refugee crisis really fascinated me. I remember a woman I helped in France in 1939 to get an American visa. The American application forms were remarkably cruel. Amongst other things they asked what religion you were. And this woman wrote 'Gentile' - non-Jewish. It was hard to explain to her that that wouldn't do. As we see it, that's not a religion, and it betrayed her Jewish origins. That sort of dilemma has always fascinated me.'

Refugees and their problems mark Ambler's whole output. First it was the political refugees of the 1930s, then those made homeless after later social conflicts. Even his quiet Americans and Englishmen, through whose eyes events are usually seen, are expatriates. While abroad they find themselves in unfamiliar situations and get caught off balance. This throws them into moral dilemmas: not abstract dilemmas, but ones that spring from concrete situations. Their psychological processes result from circumstances, not vice versa.

Ambler's earliest novels occasionally reveal when they were written by a certain popular front pathos: liberals are seen joining forces with communists to fight fascism. Of course people knew that Stalin was a monster, but 'he was a very distant monster'. Such political equations were becoming confused for Ambler by the time of the Hitler-Stalin pact. In *Journey into Fear* (1940) his earlier critical stance against the British weapons industry was replaced by a hesitant, self-critical patriotism. His first post-war novel, *The Deltschev Case* (1951) is a convincing reappraisal of Stalinism and the show trials in Stalin's Russia. A critic described it as an 'anti-Stalinist, socialist novel for light reading', and he accepts the description. His political illusions were shattered, but he remained a materialist. In his novels business concerns dominate over politics and ideologies, and money is a motivating force

behind human conduct.

'When I start on a book,' he says, 'it's a voyage of discovery. I have a theme that I want to develop. But of course it never develops as planned.' He illustrates this by his novel *Passage of Arms* of 1959. 'I wanted to understand, and in a certain way to respect, the anger of Asians discovering their own identity and learning to hate the world of the white colonialists. That was my starting point, but the book developed along quite unexpected lines. Suddenly some of the colonialists didn't have white faces any more.' It is indeed an unusual book because it described the independence movements in Malaysia and Indonesia in the 1950s, before they had begun to attract interest, yet remained critical of both sides. Colonialism leaves devastation behind amongst those colonised, so that even the natives divide up into haves and have-nots, and terrorism begins to show up in freedom movements. Yet individual figures acquire a modest dignity through their determined pursuit of their goals in life. Ambler found himself incidentally involved in an ironic epilogue. 'Strangely enough the novel was plagiarised in Singapore by a Chinese writer, who dedicated his plagiarism to a communist leader in Malaysia. Very Asiatic, I thought: you steal something and dedicate it to someone you admire.'

Many of Ambler's books are written in the first person. 'For a first-person narrative you need a particular technical know-how. But if you are aware of the limitations, it gives an added dimension of realism.' On the other hand the first-person narrator lays himself open to the reader's critical judgement. Ambler used this technique to comic effect in *Topkapi* (1962), which was also filmed. 'The hero is a suspicious character. And he's constantly giving himself away, because he just isn't very clever. The first-person narrator should never think he's a good liar.'

Ambler freely admits that his books are partly autobiographical. 'I am all the characters, all the characters have elements of myself. Obviously I can enrich them with features I have observed in others. But essentially it's all regurgitated personal experience.' This is equally true the other way round. The author is made up of several personae. In his autobiography Ambler recounts how in an interview with three journalists he gave each one a different answer to the same question. And, here in London, I find myself confronted with one of several possible Ambler personae.

This Eric Ambler is capable of becoming distinctly anti-American as he laments Britain's current decline. 'After the Second World War an American-style culture was superficially adopted in England. We think that because we all speak the same language we must also share the same mentality. But that's not true at all.' This sounds like cultural pessimism, but it is put forward with the weight of history behind it. 'It may be the result of a demoralisation that is the inevitable consequence of wars. It was more localised after the Hundred Years War; after the Napoleonic Wars the whole of Europe sank into a depression that lasted in Germany until Bismarck. France is in a depression at the moment

because it suffered nothing but defeats from 1940 on. Britain's defeats have been economic ones.'

Does he see any parallels between the present-day depressions in Europe and the 1930s: war in former Yugoslavia, the disintegration of the Soviet Union into young national states, new tidal waves of refugees? 'History does sometimes repeat itself slightly. As far as the Balkans are concerned, we are witnessing the last stage of the migration of races up the coast of the Adriatic. They suffered the worst thing that could have happened: communication got too easy and destroyed the self-contained areas where they had settled.' Apparently straightforward explanations like this are treated with greater complexity in books like *The Mask of Dimitrios* or *The Schirmer Inheritance* (1953), in which a large cast of characters make the course of history more comprehensible to the present-day reader.

When it comes to work actually in progress, he is reluctant to say anything. 'If I talk about it, it won't get finished. If I hear myself talking, I see ways that the novel could come out differently, and that would put an end to the whole project.' He hopes, despite health setbacks, to have it finished by the end of the year. The question of a publisher is not yet resolved. 'I got fed up when my books were abridged to save paper. And there aren't many paperback series left that I find attractive. So I have withdrawn the English rights.' Whoever is going to publish the latest Eric Ambler novel will be required to bring out new editions of the other eighteen. It is hard to imagine any English publisher letting such a chance slip.

For more than a decade, from the middle of the 1960s, Ambler lived in Switzerland on Lake Geneva. He returned to London at the end of the 1970s because of his wife's illness. 'I like Switzerland. But it is an incredibly difficult place to explain to foreigners. How the cantons function, how gradual changes are made possible by plebiscite. The reticence of the Swiss and their remarkable understanding of history.'

When I leave, the table is set for a simple lunch. The cook accompanies me past the kitchen and out of the door. Just round the corner is the Swiss Embassy, with the Swiss flag fluttering wanly in the wind. At the moment Switzerland is struggling with its relationship to refugees, whether victims or persecutors; a national identity that had been taken for granted is in crisis and falling apart. On this subject, too, Ambler's work has quite a lot to say.

Eric Ambler's complete works are published in German by Diogenes Verlag. Latest additions to the list are: *The Mask of Dimitrios*, *Journey into Fear*, *The Deltschev Case*, *A Kind of Anger*, *Topkapi* and *The Levantines*.

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Translated by Celia Skrine