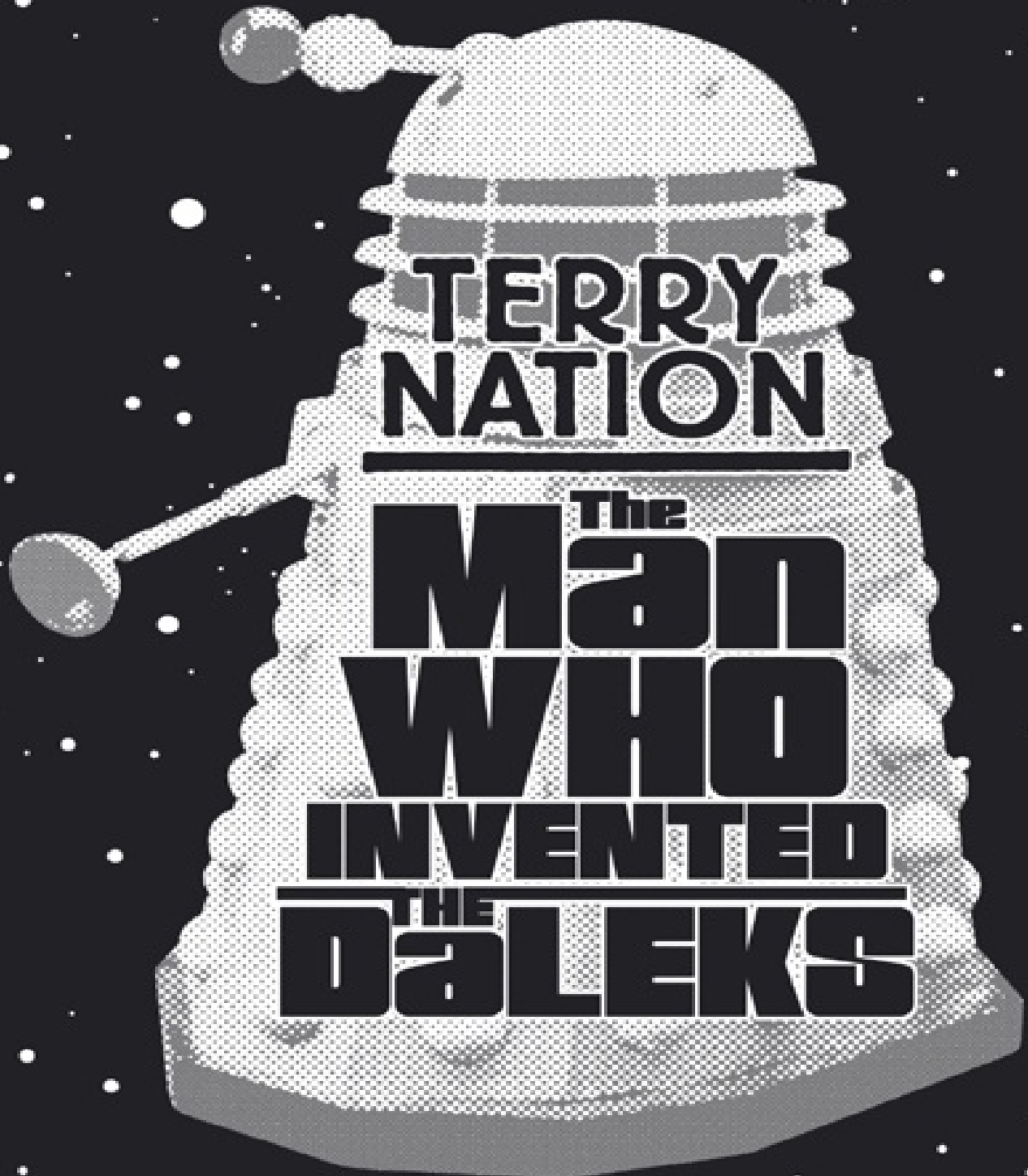


• 'Spectacular... a splendidly entertaining journey into the stranger corners of the modern British imagination' DOMINIC SANDBROOK



ALWYN W. TURNER

## Praise for

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### *The Man Who Invented the Daleks: The Strange Worlds of Terry Nation*

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‘Even if you can’t stand science fiction, the chances are that you’ve seen something either written or inspired by Terry Nation. The man who invented the Daleks was not just the brains behind one of the most enduring fictional monsters in television history, he was also one of the most popular storytellers of the last half-century. In this spectacular biography, Alwyn Turner shapes Nation’s extraordinary career into a wonderfully rich account of British popular culture since the war. Carefully researched and beautifully written, his book covers everything from the early days of *Doctor Who* to the madly overwrought pleasures of *Blake’s 7*, taking in such classics as *The Avengers*, *The Persuaders!* and *Survivors* on the way. From the aftermath of a devastating pandemic to a lost city on an alien world from Nazis in space to Robin Hood in the far future, this is a splendidly entertaining journey into the stranger corners of the modern British imagination. I loved it’

Dominic Sandbrook, author of *State of Emergency – The Way We Were: Britain, 1970–1974*

‘*The Man Who Invented the Daleks* is more than a biography of the writer Terry Nation. It’s a group portrait of a whole generation of TV writers who worked in the adventure serials and series of the Sixties and Seventies, and the importance and vitality of popular TV narrative in that era. Nation was one of several script writers zig-zagging their way through the hectic lives of the Saint, Doctor Who, Mrs Peel and Steed, creating new mythologies for late-Twentieth-Century Britain’

Paul Magrs, novelist and scriptwriter

## Praise for

### *Rejoice! Rejoice!: Britain in the 1980s*

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‘Put[s] into cold perspective what at the time we were too befuddled with emotion to understand ... Turner has produced a masterly mix of shrewd analysis, historical detail and telling quotes ... The book is full of wry asides and amusing anecdotes ... Indispensable’

James Delingpole, *Mail on Sunday*

‘One of the pleasures of Alwyn Turner’s breathless romp through the 1980s is that it overflows with unusual juxtapositions and surprising insights ... The tone is that of a wildly enthusiastic guide leading us on a breakneck tour through politics, sport and culture, bursting with weird nuggets of knowledge gleaned everywhere from semi-forgotten John Mortimer novels to Wham! singles’

Dominic Sandbrook, *The Sunday Times*

‘This kaleidoscopic history ... provides a vivid and enjoyable guide to these turbulent years. Ranging broadly across popular culture as well as high politics, and featuring *Doctor Who* and Ben Elton as prominently as Michael Foot and Michael Heseltine, Turner brings the period alive and offers insight into both sides of a polarised nation’

*BBC History Magazine*, Pick of the Month

‘Turner’s account of the 1980s is as wide ranging as that fractured, multi-faceted decade demands ... deft at picking out devilish details and damning quotes from history that is less recent than you think’

Victoria Segal, *MOJO*

‘Turner does an excellent job in synthesising the culture and art of the day into the wider political discourse. The result is resolutely entertaining’

*Metro*

## Praise for

### *Crisis? What Crisis?: Britain in the 1970s*

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‘Alwyn Turner has certainly hit upon a rich and fascinating subject, and his intertwining of political and cultural history is brilliantly done. His book makes me so relieved I wasn’t an adult at the time .

This is a masterful work of social history and cultural commentary, told with much wit. It almost makes you feel as if you were there’

Roger Lewis, *Mail on Sunday*

‘Turner appears to have spent much of the decade watching television, and his knowledge of old soap operas, sitcoms and TV dramas is deployed to great effect throughout this vivid, brilliantly researched chronicle ... Turner may be an anorak, but he is an acutely intelligent anorak’

Francis Wheen, *New Statesman*

‘An ambitious, entertaining alternative history of the 1970s which judges the decade not just by its political turbulence but by the leg-up it gave popular culture’

*Time Out*

‘Entertaining and splendidly researched ... He has delved into episodes of soap operas and half-forgotten novels to produce an account that displays wit, colour and detail’

Brian Groom, *Financial Times*

‘Turner combines a fan’s sense of populism (weaving in references to a rapidly expanding popular culture) with a keen grasp of the political landscape, which gives his survey of an often overlooked decade its cutting edge’

*Metro*

‘Fascinating ... an affectionate but unflinching portrait of the era’

Nicholas Foulkes, *Independent on Sunday*

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**THE MAN WHO  
INVENTED  
THE DALEKS**

THE  
STRANGE  
WORLDS OF  
**TERRY  
NATION**

Alwyn W. Turner

**A**urum

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Primarily I must thank those who were kind enough to share their memories of Terry Nation, to supply additional information, to put me in touch with others or simply to point me in the right direction when I might otherwise have got lost:

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Obviously none of the above should be considered to condone the contents of this book. Apologies too to everyone whose work and words I've quoted in such a cavalier fashion, probably missing all the important points.

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*This book is dedicated to Harry Greene and John Summers, two men I've been privileged to know and who also happened to know Terry Nation.*

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# Vote Dalek!

The 2005 General Election was not one of the great moments in British political history. There was no doubt from the outset that the result would be a return of the incumbent Labour government, even though its prime minister, Tony Blair, had taken the country into a series of wars, the last two of which at least (the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq) were proving unpopular. The Conservative opposition was in such disarray that its senior MPs had recently staged a palace coup to remove their leader, Iain Duncan Smith, before he had a chance to lead the party to utter humiliation at the polls, but even his replacement, Michael Howard, was able to do little more than steady the ship, increasing the share of the vote by less than one percentage point. And although the Liberal Democrats did increase their number of MPs, they remained firmly in third place.

In the absence of any discernible interest in the outcome among the general public, the BBC weekly listings magazine, *Radio Times*, chose to ignore the workings of democracy and instead used its cover to herald a much more interesting event that was also happening that week: the return of television after sixteen and a half years of the Daleks, one of whom was to appear in that week's episode of the newly resuscitated science fiction series *Doctor Who*. There was an acknowledgement of other concerns, with the creatures pictured in front of the Houses of Parliament, echoing a scene from 'The Dalek Invasion of Earth' (broadcast in 1964, a year when Labour's election victory under Harold Wilson really did mark a change in political eras), but there was no doubt what the big story was. Just to be clear, the fold-out cover also promised a free Dalek poster for every reader, and bore the slogan: vote dalek!

It was a striking piece of artwork, good enough that when, in 2008, the Periodical Publishers Association organised a survey to find the best British magazine cover of all time, it came top of the poll, fighting off competition from *Vogue's* memorial issue for Princess Diana, *Tatler's* shot of Vivienne Westwood dressed as Margaret Thatcher and *OK!'s* exclusive coverage of the wedding of David and Victoria Beckham. As a tribute to Britain's enduring fascination with the Daleks, it was hard to know which was the greater honour: dominating the *Radio Times* or triumphing over such iconic national figures. In any event it was a handsome compliment to the 42-year-old inventions of television scriptwriter named Terry Nation, who had died in California eight years before the cover appeared.

It was not, however, the only indication of the durability of his work. Much of his television writing was already enjoying a new lease of life on DVD, while even the few surviving episodes of a neglected comedy series, *Floggit's*, when rediscovered by BBC radio in 2009, were re-broadcast, more than half a century after they first aired. The appeal was not simply one of nostalgia, for his creations continued to inspire new interpretations. The *Doctor Who* episode that the *Radio Times* was promoting, 'Dalek' saw some significant additions to the mythology he had left, and it was followed in 2008 by a remake of his 1970s series *Survivors*. Meanwhile, 2010 saw an American reworking of *And Soon the Darkness*, a film he had co-written forty years earlier, and reports of a continuation – or possibly revival – of another show from that decade, *Blake's 7*, appeared in the press on a regular basis for many years. Indeed that series remained familiar enough to be lampooned in the cinema short *Blake*

*Junction 7* (2004), starring Martin Freeman, Mackenzie Crook and Johnny Vegas. Clearly this was a body of work whose resilience transcended its origins in what, at the time of its creation, was thought of as the transient, even disposable, world of the broadcast media.

Beyond his most celebrated work in *Doctor Who*, *Survivors* and *Blake's 7*, Nation's list of credits was equally impressive. He wrote dozens of episodes for action adventure shows such as *The Avengers*, *The Saint*, *The Persuaders!*, *The Baron*, *Department S*, *The Champions*, *The Protectors* and *MacGyver*. He adapted some key science fiction works for television, among them the first ever screen version of a Philip K. Dick story. And he wrote for many of Britain's most celebrated comedians, including Tony Hancock, Peter Sellers, Frankie Howerd, Ronnie Barker and Eric Sykes. There was too a disparate collection of one-off pieces for cinema and television, some of which remain fondly remembered in certain circles, even if they didn't command huge audiences (*The Amazing Robert Baldick*, *The House in Nightmare Park*, even *What a Whopper*), as well as a children's novel, *Rebecca's World*, that retains a devoted following. And on at least one occasion he claimed that a largely forgotten television play, *Uncle Selwyn*, had given him more pleasure than anything else he had done.

The overwhelming majority of that writing came in the twenty-five years from 1955 to 1980, an era that has come to be regarded as the golden age of British television. Nation was present at the outset as the dominance exerted over popular culture by the cinema and radio began to fade in the face of the new medium, and his contributions were to help define the period and establish the shape of the entertainment industry. If he is remembered chiefly as a writer of popular science fiction ('I will always be Terry "Daleks" Nation,' he acknowledged towards the end of his life), that does scant justice to the breadth and diversity of his writing.

Nor does it accurately reflect his own taste and interests, for despite his use of alien planets and future societies as settings for much of his best-known work, there is little to indicate any commitment to, or great involvement in, science fiction as it evolved during his adult life. His near-contemporary Gerry Anderson, who made shows like *Thunderbirds* and *Captain Scarlet*, talked of television having a proselytising, pioneering role: 'I have always been a great believer that science fiction entertainment makes a great contribution to the progress that we make in all sorts of spheres. But Nation never seemed to share that concern. Instead he used the trappings and accoutrements of science fiction simply because they were the conventions expected by the audience, in the same way that when he was writing about a special agent, there would always be a gun, a car and a gimmick. In both instances, the genre requirements were little more than window-dressing, providing a backdrop for his true interest: the telling of a tale of adventure.

Because he was above all else a storyteller, drawing heavily on the literature he had encountered in his childhood, and translating the traditions of adventure-writing from the first half of the twentieth century into a form appropriate for the television age. Certainly that was how he saw the first Dalek story at the time. 'I set out to write a thundering great thriller,' he said in 1964, 'the sort of thing I lapped up when I was a boy.' In a set of notes he submitted for the second season of *Blake's 7*, he spelled out his approach to writing: 'Stories must be strong, well plotted and contain a lot of action and movement. A great deal happens in our stories. Moral points and philosophical discussion must always be well cloaked in our action-adventure.' It is possible to see his work as an extended love letter to the popular thrillers of his youth. 'If he'd been writing novels, you'd have called him a page-turner,' commented Barry Letts, producer of *Doctor Who* in the early 1970s. 'You always wanted to know what would happen next.' Verity Lambert, the founding producer of the series, shared the same opinion: 'I thought he was a terribly good storyteller – that was absolutely his strength.'

Indeed so great was his love of telling tales that it often coloured the accounts he gave of his own life and work. He had a tendency to exaggeration and simplification, reluctant to allow mere facts get in the way of a good story. When asked in the early days of the Daleks how he'd come up with the name of his creation, he explained that he had taken it 'from the spine of an encyclopaedia. I looked up on the shelf and saw one volume marked "dal to lek".' It was an inspired idea and it continued to circulate, despite his subsequent public retraction. 'It's absolute rubbish, it's a load of lies,' he admitted in 1973. 'Persistent journalists wanted a romantic story about how the name came to be, and I didn't have a romantic story. But then I'm a writer, so I made one up, and that was the story we put around for years.' His instincts were right the first time. The prosaic truth – that the name simply popped into his head – was much less interesting than the version he'd concocted, and the fabricated story of the origin of the Daleks was repeated even in some newspaper notices of his death.

Similar distortions were to be found elsewhere in his interviews. 'I suspect that I've written more TV scripts than anyone else in Britain,' he once declared, going on to enumerate his contributions as 'some thirty episodes of *The Saint*, most of *The Baron*, *The Persuaders!* and forty episodes of *The Avengers*'. Again, this was not strictly true; the real figures were thirteen episodes of *The Saint*, six of *The Avengers*, and seven out of twenty-four episodes of *The Persuaders!*. The claim to have penned most of *The Baron* was more justified, but only just: he had a writing credit on seventeen of the thirty episodes that were filmed, though four of those were co-written. Perhaps it merely felt like he had turned out that many shows; more likely it was a propensity to embroider whether it were necessary or not.

Nation's love of story-telling and the durability of his work are not, of course, unrelated. No one went to his shows expecting to come away with a deeper understanding of the nature of the human condition, or to have looked through a window on to the tortured psyche of the author. There was, it is true, sometimes a commentary on politics and society to be found, though it is not always clear how conscious this was, but it was hardly the chief selling point. That was, and remains, Nation's ability to tell a rattling good tale. He did make some major contributions to the evolution of popular television: he could, for example, claim credit for popularising the ideas of story arcs and season cliff-hangers in television fantasy shows, devices that became taken for granted – but at the heart of everything was pure escapism. 'I believe that what people want on television is entertainment, and action stories are what I want to write,' he explained. 'There are plenty of other people to write sociological dramas.'

It was a lesson he had learnt from the popular writers whose work he so eagerly devoured in his early years. The novelist Edgar Wallace, the most successful of those authors (his dominance of the market was such that in the early 1930s it was estimated that one in every four books read in Britain was written by him), was forthright in his deep dislike of literary fiction, which he saw as being concerned with internal, personal experience; in his own work, he insisted, he sought to remove all elements of subjectivity, concentrating solely on action, on objective events. Such an approach was summed up by the critic Richard Usborne, writing about John Buchan, another of the great adventure writers of the period: 'The stories kept the heroes constantly on the move. But the rolling stones gathered no atmospheric moss of character.' Or, as Britain's most revered film critic, Dilys Powell, pointed out, 'in a thriller too much character clutters up the plot'. The same attitude was easily extended into science fiction, where, Kingsley Amis observed in 1960, there was an 'exaltation of idea or plot over characterisation'.

The novels of Wallace, Buchan and others were part of the staple diet of an imaginative schoolboy like Nation in the 1930s and 1940s, consumed for the same reasons that Dickson McCunn, one of Buchan's heroes, had embraced the work of Sir Walter Scott in his own (fictional) childhood: 'he had

read the novels not for their insight into human character or for their historical pageantry, but because they gave him material wherewith to construct fantastic journeys.' And on those fantastic journeys the reader – and, later, the viewer – was not over-concerned with notions of originality or consistency. H.C. McNeile, who wrote the hugely popular Bulldog Drummond books under the pseudonym Sapper, borrowed freely from the stories of other writers and never troubled himself with building a coherent narrative across the novels. Even his use of names was inconsistent and he wasn't always sure if a character were alive or dead: Drummond's housekeeper dies in one book, but returns without a scratch, or indeed an explanation, in the next.

The same traits were to be found in Nation's work. The subtleties of characterisation were of little interest, influences were seldom hard to identify, and continuity could always be sacrificed if it got in the way of the tale. He was fortunate to find a sympathetic ally in Huw Wheldon, the controller of BBC1 in the 1960s, who was a big fan of the Daleks; Wheldon was convinced that television was 'overwhelmingly a story-telling medium', and argued that *Doctor Who* was about something archetypal: 'the path into the unknown forest'. That was perhaps further than Nation himself would have gone, but there is in his best writing an element of the myth, or perhaps the fairy tale, that has helped it to endure. And, as in all the best fairy tales, the figures are painted with a very broad brush. Heroes fight seemingly impossible odds and (normally) win, but are frequently eclipsed in the popular imagination by the monstrosity of the villains, whether in the form of the evil scientist Davros in *Doctor Who* or of Servalan, the ruthless dominatrix figure who represented the forces of oppression in *Blake's 7*.

Above all, there are the Daleks, the single most enduring creations to come out of British television in the twentieth century. All the other iconic British screen presences, whether on television or film, were in the first instance literary creations, from Winnie the Pooh and Hercule Poirot through *The Lord of the Rings* and the Narnia stories to James Bond and Harry Potter. The Daleks are the only great popular myth, endlessly reinvented and reinterpreted by other writers, to have been created specifically for television. Their 2005 return came in the midst of a phase of revivals, ranging from the film of *The Avengers* (1998) to the BBC's *Reggie Perrin* (2009), but while the others merely emphasised how frozen in time was the appeal of the originals, the Daleks alone satisfied the demand for nostalgia while also building a huge new constituency. Like any great myth, they have outlived and outgrown their creator, entering the popular consciousness to become instantly recognisable by name alone, even to those who have never knowingly watched *Doctor Who*. Perhaps their only rival is the Doctor himself, and it is arguable that he would scarcely be remembered as anything but a footnote in television history had the Daleks not been such an instantly huge success.

And they were extraordinarily successful. The Dalekmania craze that swept Britain at the end of 1964 saw over a hundred thousand copies of a single toy sold that Christmas; although the fever inevitably abated, a decade later there were still over a hundred Dalek products on the market. The copyright in the creatures was owned jointly by Terry Nation and by the BBC, and it was the royalties from the sales of these products, rather than his writing, that made him a rich man. The scale of the merchandising also inspired the creation of the lucrative BBC Enterprises (now BBC Worldwide), an organisation whose profits rose from a modest £1 million in 1968 to become a major contributor to the corporation's revenues. Beyond that, the Daleks are the most famous aliens and the ultimate baddies in British popular culture, resolutely evil with no pretence whatsoever of redeeming features.

None of which bore much resemblance to the man himself. 'He was the nicest guy you could ever wish to meet,' noted Terrance Dicks, who was for a while his script editor on *Doctor Who*. 'I've never really met anybody who didn't like Terry.' Almost everyone Nation came into contact with had much

the same feeling. He made and kept friends, he was a generous host and he was deeply loyal, both to those he knew and to fans of his work. ~~‘He was an intelligent, funny, warm and very friendly man’~~ commented Roger Moore, who worked with him on *The Persuaders!*. ‘He was a joy to have around.’ Perhaps the most eloquent testimony was that of a *Doctor Who* director, Richard Martin: ‘He had that lovely, rich, pastoral voice. And it sounded good and it sounded wonderful, and it was full of courage and personality. When people say “Terry Nation”, I hear his voice.’ The identification of the accent was perhaps misplaced – Nation’s voice revealed his upbringing in Cardiff, a city that was far from pastoral – but the sentiment is clear.

‘Tall, handsome, relaxed,’ observed the *Guardian* at the height of his fame in 1966, ‘Mr Nation looks like a Welsh James Bond.’ Coming from a lower-middle-class background in South Wales, his success enabled him to acquire a taste for good living, and he did so with great gusto, developing a fondness for fine wines, indulging his love of clothes and delighting in his purchase of a mansion in the country. In the early 1970s, remembered Terrance Dicks, he and Nation had come out of a meeting and were walking down Piccadilly when Nation remarked there were a couple of things he needed to talk about further and that there was no time like the present: “‘Look, we’re just about to pass the Ritz, let’s go and have a champagne cocktail and discuss it.” And I said, “I like working with you, Terry. You’ve got style.” And he just beamed. He really enjoyed himself. He enjoyed his success, and rightly so.’

‘Terry was larger than life,’ recalled Deb Boulwood, whose father, Dave Freeman, had been one of Nation’s first co-writers back in 1956. ‘He walked into a room and you knew Terry was there.’ Again there are traces of the celebrity authors of the 1920s and 1930s. Breathless newspaper reports of the day revelled in the eccentricities of Edgar Wallace, who was so lazy he would always take a taxi rather than walk, no matter how short the journey, and who wrote inside a large glass box, constructed in his study to keep out draughts, while wearing a silk dressing-gown and chain-smoking through an absurdly long cigarette-holder.

Nation’s own writing methods were less flamboyant, but shared the same devil-may-care nonchalance, the same casual professionalism, that has always been cherished by lovers of popular fiction. He may not have been able to match Wallace’s boast of having once written an 80,000 word novel in a weekend, or thriller writer John Creasey’s claim to have written two novels in a week (‘and on the Saturday afternoon, I played cricket’), but he prided himself on – and was valued by others for – the rapidity with which he could produce a script. It was a facility that came partly from his reluctance to redraft or rewrite. ‘I work directly on to the typewriter,’ Nation explained in 1989, ‘and because I’m a bad typist I would seldom go back. It really bothered me to have to rewrite things. So I’d written myself into a corner, I’d write myself out rather than go back and redo it.’ For some of those with whom he worked, this was undoubtedly an asset. ‘Terry’s first drafts often ended up as his final drafts,’ noted Philip Hinchcliffe, a *Doctor Who* producer, with approval. ‘He was a very professional writer. The construction of his stories and the fast-paced movement of the action – it all added up, and you got a thoroughly professional set of scripts when they landed on your desk.’

It was not, however, an attitude that won universal approval from his fellow writers. ‘I’ve known him to write a script in five days,’ remembered Chris Boucher, script editor of *Blake’s 7*. ‘He simply roared through it, and I have to say when you write that fast, it does from time to time show.’ Terrance Dicks agreed: ‘He had a habit of falling into patterns. There were a lot of recurrent themes: people planting bombs, and being chased and spraining an ankle. In Terry’s scripts, people were always spraining their ankles at moments of crisis.’ There were times, he suggested, when Nation didn’t seem to put in as much effort as he should: ‘Given his successful career, he was obviously a very good

writer, but he needed the occasional bit of prodding.’ Brian Clemens, who worked with Nation on series like *The Avengers* and *The Persuaders!*, and who co-wrote *And Soon the Darkness* with him, was more forthright: ‘Terry had talent, a lot of talent. If he’d concentrated more, he’d have more of a track record. He was a lovely guy and a fine writer, but he was bloody lazy.’

The charge of laziness, of not trying hard enough, was made in reference to Nation’s occasional lack of creative engagement with a script, rather than to his work rate, which was undeniably impressive. ‘Terry was very ambitious really, but in a nice way,’ reflected his long-time agent, Beryl Vertue. ‘He really wanted to get on and he liked nice things. He wanted to achieve.’ Even at the height of the Daleks’ success – when his creations were rivalled only by the Beatles in terms of media coverage and merchandising revenue – he continued to write at an intense pace, driven both by a work ethic that reflected his South Wales upbringing and by a feeling of frustration that he hadn’t yet realised his visions. ‘I have never ever sat and watched something I’ve written without a sense of embarrassment and a sense of failed achievements,’ he said in 1972. ‘It happens to be up there on the screen, but it was never the way I intended it, it was never as successful as I hoped it would be.’

The prodigious scale of the output that resulted was not unique. Nation was part of a tight little group of writers that shaped much British television of the 1960s and 1970s, a group that also included the likes of Brian Clemens, Philip Broadley, Dennis Spooner, Harry W. Junkin, Clive Exton and Donald James. Here too there were echoes of an earlier time, when the thriller-writing boom of the 1930s was dominated by a handful of authors – John Creasey, Sydney Horler, Edwy Searles Brook and others – all capable of turning out a dozen or more novels a year, often using pseudonyms to cover their tracks for different publishers. ‘Between the mid-sixties and the early seventies all the episodic film series in this country were being written by about eight writers,’ said Clemens. ‘We tended to lean on each other.’

It was a reasonable expectation that if a viewer tuned into a popular British drama of the time, one or other of these names would appear in the credits, in the capacity either of writer or of script editor (the latter function also known as story editor, or sometimes story consultant). And the two roles were closely interlinked. As script editors on various series, they would commission each other because, as Nation remembered: ‘We all faced the same problem, a daily problem, that there weren’t many people who could do scripts. We would tend to rewrite and write for each other. Clemens had done a couple for me, and I had done some things for him.’ And, reciprocating the (mostly) friendly rivalry that existed between them, he added: ‘Clemens was the fastest writer I had ever come across. He was a little facile, but by God he could turn them out!’

Many of these men came from similar backgrounds. They were not so much a generation, as a tight slither of a generation. Nation, Exton, Clemens, James and Spooner were born within twenty-eight months of each other; all of them were formed in childhood by the early days of radio and by the glory years of Hollywood; all were slightly too young to have served in the Second World War; and all embarked on their careers just as British television began to take off. Typically they came from unprivileged backgrounds and were not university-educated. ‘We all shared the same social experiences and listened to the same radio programmes and so on,’ reflected Clemens.

Within a couple of years either side of Nation were also to be found the likes of Leon Griffiths, Tony Barwick, Richard Harris and Troy Kennedy Martin, who worked on the same series that provided him with regular work, whether it were *Out of the Unknown*, *The Saint* or *The Persuaders!* Between them, these writers were responsible for bringing to the small screen everything from *Cars*, *Captain Scarlet* and *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)* to *Poirot*, *Minder*, *The Professionals* and *Shoestring*, as well as Nation’s own contributions. Without them, British television would have looked

very different indeed. And – in slightly different fields – there were comedy writers including John Junkin and the team of Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, as well as programme-makers like Geri Anderson and Verity Lambert, all born in the same few years and all of whose paths were to intersect with Nation's career.

For his story is, to some extent, shared by these others, rooted in the same experiences that moulded the country in the decades that followed the war, as it made its uncertain transition from Austerity Britain to Swinging London and beyond into the uncertainties of the 1970s and 1980s.

# A Boy's Own Story

Terry Nation moved to London in January 1955 at the age of twenty-four, intending, in his words, 'to be an actor or comedian or something – I wasn't very sure what'. The city that he found was just emerging, somewhat to its own surprise, into the dawn of an extraordinary period in British cultural history. The previous July had seen the celebration of Derationing Day, when bacon and meat finally came off the ration, marking an end to all wartime restrictions on food and other goods. Although the city was still pockmarked with bombsites left over from the Blitz, even in such affluent areas as Oxford Street, there was a sense of having left behind the long, wearying struggle of the Second World War and the ensuing period of Austerity.

In their place came the first stirrings of a new consumer-based society. The year of Nation's arrival was to see key events that would transform the country's identity: the launch of independent television, providing a second channel to break the BBC's previous monopoly; the opening of Manolo Quant's Bazaar, the first of the London boutiques that would become world famous over the next decade; and the arrival from America of rock and roll in the shape of the hit single 'Rock Around the Clock' by Bill Haley and his Comets, together with the British response, Lonnie Donegan's 'Rock Island Line', the record that launched the skiffle craze. The following year built on these foundations with the emergence of Elvis Presley and the coming of the Angry Young Men, the latter announcing themselves in the shape of John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* and Colin Wilson's book *The Outsider*. There was also the first sighting of pop art in the exhibition *This Is Tomorrow*, featuring Richard Hamilton's collage 'Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?', a celebration of the American dream as revealed through advertising.

Meanwhile the world of comedy, in which Nation hoped to make his mark, was in the grip of the revolutionary radio series *The Goon Show*, though a newly launched radio sitcom, *Hancock's Half Hour*, was fast emerging as an even more influential and popular rival.

But if it were bliss to be alive in those days, no one had told the establishment, which remained largely unaware of this groundswell of innovation, these early manifestations of a youth culture that would soon sweep the country and then much of the rest of the world. The radicalism of the late 1940s had faded from British political life, and when Nation arrived in London, the prime minister was still the 80-year-old Winston Churchill, kept in power more by sentiment than sense. Although he was soon to be replaced by the comparatively youthful Anthony Eden (born as recently as 1897), the opposition leaders in the 1955 General Election – Clement Attlee of Labour and Clement Davies of the Liberals – were both in their seventies.

Even these staid circles, however, were soon to be disrupted, first by the humiliation of the Suez Crisis, when it became apparent that British foreign policy could no longer be determined without reference to the USA, and then by the noisy arrival of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, bringing a sense that a younger generation wanted to have a say in building a new country. In the meantime, hopeful young men and women flocked to London from the provinces, determined – like Nation – to make their mark, to embrace the new cultural opportunities that were opening up.

Terence Joseph Nation was born in Llandaff, Cardiff in 1930, the only child of Bert and Sue, a



Gilbert Joseph Nation and Susan Nation (née Norris) were generally known. It was not an auspicious time or place. Cardiff was the largest city in Wales, with a population of just over a quarter of a million, but it was already in serious decline, the splendour of its civic buildings looking back to past glories in the late nineteenth century, with little sense of hope for the future. In its heyday it had provided the focal point for the South Wales collieries in the valleys that stretched northwards and westwards from the city; its docks shipped coal to all corners of the world, and attracted labour from similarly far-flung places. Continuing expansion had seemed inevitable and inexorable in the years up to the First World War, but in the 1920s demand for coal began to fall. Shipping turned increasingly to oil for its primary fuel, the international markets struggled to recover from the post-war slump, and production costs rose, the more accessible seams having been worked out. Further losses were sustained as British industry went into recession at the end of the decade; coal production fell to half its level at the turn of the century and, in the words of one contemporary account, ‘unemployment descended on the valleys like a deadly and malignant disease’. More than a third of miners in the South Wales coalfields were out of work by the early 1930s and Cardiff, so dependent on the industry, was registering unemployment levels of over twenty per cent.

In the midst of the decline came the events of 1926, when miners throughout the country went on strike, resisting the mine-owners’ attempt to protect profits by cutting wages and increasing working hours. Under the slogan ‘not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day’, the conflict dragged on for several months, despite a general strike that was called in solidarity but collapsed after just nine days. It was – in terms of working days lost – the most severe industrial dispute Britain had ever witnessed and it ended with complete victory for the employers. Memories of the bitterness of the time remained for years to come, exacerbated by the ensuing depression and by the desperation of the miners’ hunger march that left Cardiff in 1931, the year that annual coal production in Britain fell below a thousand million tons for the first time in the century. Decades later, when the novelist John Summers, who had known Terry Nation in Cardiff, wrote his classic *Edge of Violence*, a thinly fictionalised retelling of the 1966 Aberfan disaster, he placed that tragedy in the context of a long history of neglect and oppression, looking back to the 1930s when ‘foraging parties of starved miners started raiding the farms over the mountain to dig up hardening beets and swedes out of the ground and bring them home to their children small-faced with hunger’. Born in Rhymney in 1928, Summers remembered his childhood ‘as a time of soup made from a single slice of bacon and water and salt and an onion’.

Terry Nation, with a self-employed furniture restorer and salesman as a father and with a house-proud mother (‘stiff and starchy’, as one friend described her), was at one stage removed from those events. The fact that his birth was announced in a paid notice in the *South Wales Echo*, as well as his time in a private school, suggests that this was a family with social aspirations pointing firmly away from the mining villages of the valleys. Similarly the area they lived in was relatively affluent. ‘Llandaff,’ remembered a resident of the working-class Grangetown district in the early 1940s, ‘was a different planet. I could not believe the size of the houses and gardens, but the area did seem dull compared with the clamour and bustle of Lower Grange.’ Nonetheless, it would have been difficult for an imaginative child to live in Cardiff through those times without being affected by the hardship and anger that was everywhere evident, and Nation was to talk in later life of ‘the far-left socialism of his youth’.

It was an era that he memorably evoked in ‘The Assistant’, a 1963 episode of the television series *Hancock*, with a character named Owen Bowen (played by the Welsh actor Kenneth Griffith) recalling the deprivation of the time: ‘Unemployment. Men standing brooding on street corners. Sad-eyed women, too proud to beg, laying empty tables.’ Despite being ostensibly a comedy, the show also

featured a long monologue from Owen recalling the miners' defiance, with not a joke in sight: 'We were striking for a living wage, and they tried to force us into submission through starvation. But we wouldn't bend. So what did they do? They sent in the army. Armed troops against women and children! So what did we do? We formed a solid line, Welshman arm-in-arm with Welshman, a thin line of courage against the might of the English army ...'

Nothing else in Nation's work came close to this explicit account of the society he was born into but traces of his hatred of injustice and social oppression run through much of his best writing and surely have their roots here. It's also noticeable that more than once in his comedy-writing days he uses a joke about a character being able to trace their ancestry all the way back to their parents. Mixing in the Oxbridge circles that dominated the BBC in the 1950s and 1960s, he was conscious that he was not from that world.

Meanwhile, popular culture in Cardiff was split between two competing factions. On the one hand there was the entertainment found in the pubs, clubs and picture-houses through the working week; on the other, religion in church and chapel on Sundays. There were, for example, already fourteen cinemas in the town at the time of his birth, most having made the transition from silent movies to talkies (though some silents were still being shown), but just as significant was the space allocated every week by the *South Wales Echo* for semi-display adverts touting the forthcoming attractions of the Sabbath. It was normal for forty or fifty religious services to be thus promoted, advertising a range of sects that centred on the mainstream world of low church Protestantism – Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Wesleyans – while allowing a little room on the fringes for groups such as the Christian Scientists, Spiritualists and Salvation Army.

The divide between the two cultures was such that, on a Sunday, pubs were legally prevented from opening and cinemas were not permitted to show films, regulations that didn't apply twenty-five miles to the east, over the Severn Estuary and into England. It was not until 1952 that it became permissible to screen a movie on the Sabbath, and only in 1961 were local authorities allowed to poll the electorates on whether the bar on pub opening should continue (not all took advantage of the opportunity). But there were, of course, ways around the rules. Private members' clubs – where alcohol could be sold – enjoyed a thriving trade on Sundays, while the cinemas responded to the ban by putting on shows featuring dance bands and comedians, though there were restrictions even on those performances. There were all sorts of strange rules and regulations,' remembered Stan Stenner, the city's leading post-war comedian, who lived a couple of streets away from the Nations. 'You could do a show on a Sunday but you weren't allowed to be a double-act or talk to anyone onstage. There was no cross-patter on a Sunday, because of the licence.'

Of these rival claims for his affections, there was little doubt that for Nation the cinema won hands down over church. There was a religious influence on his upbringing – apart from formal church-going, he spent a great deal of time at the house of his father's friend, Bob White, the Anglican vergew of Llandaff Cathedral – and the influence of the work ethic fostered by religion was evident throughout his life. 'I'm a prolific writer because I'm always uneasy,' he was to reflect. 'Maybe it's my Welsh guilt that I can't really sit around and not do anything. I feel very guilty if I'm in a room and not actually working at the table.'

But the cinema loomed far larger. He became addicted to the magic of the picture-houses, the dark crowded theatres, thick with clouds of cigarette and pipe smoke through which the imagery of Hollywood could be seen flickering on a screen, briefly transporting a huddled, rain-sodden mass to a far-off land of glamour and wealth. Nation found his escape from everyday reality in that dream of America, as did so much of the country in the years of depression, those slightly older than him

fuelling their fantasies with mass-produced clothes bought on hire purchase. 'You may have three halfpence in your pocket and not a prospect in the world,' wrote George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), 'but in your new clothes you can stand on the street corner, indulging in a private daydream of yourself as Clark Gable or Greta Garbo, which compensates you for a great deal.'

Nation may have been too young to express his dreams quite so overtly, but he would have understood the sentiment and for him, fantasy was always liable to take precedence over the mundane reality of education. 'He played truant for one whole term,' recounted his wife, Kate. 'He got four out because he'd been given these cheques for his school fees and finally the headmaster rang his mother and asked where the money was. And it was still in his pocket. He'd been to the movies every afternoon.' As he remembered, 'I grew up in the front row of the local Odeon.'

The nature of the films that Nation encountered, however, was not quite as wide-ranging as he perhaps would have wished. Desperately few science fiction movies were available in the late 1930s and 1940s, with the exception of single-reel serials like *Flash Gordon*, nor was the cinema able to satisfy his childhood taste for horror stories. ('I read a lot of horror fiction,' he was to reflect; 'gave myself the scares in the dark'.) There had been a spate of impressive and successful horror movies coming over from America but, in an early panic about the influence of cinema, their popularity had prompted British film censors to introduce in 1937 a new 'H' certificate, restricting the viewing of such material to those aged sixteen or over. A few years later, a decision was made in official circles that fictional horror was not conducive to civilian morale during wartime, and between 1942 and 1945 'H' certificate films were banned altogether; just at the age when an adolescent, particularly one as tall as Nation, should have been trying to sneak in to see a movie for adults, the opportunity was snatched away.

The only home-grown rival to the dominance of the cinema was BBC radio, the first truly national cultural phenomenon that the country had known. The British Broadcasting Company had begun transmissions in 1922, at which stage there were just 35,000 licences in the country, permitting the bearers to receive the early broadcasts. By the time of Nation's birth, that figure had risen to three million and it was to treble in the following decade, while the BBC had been transformed into the British Broadcasting Corporation, established under a royal charter as the monopoly provider of radio services: the first nationalised industry. It was not, though, without rivals, particularly at the weekend when the entertainment on offer left a great deal to be desired. For John Reith, the first director-general of the corporation, shared with the Welsh establishment a determination that Sundays should be 'quiet islands on the tossing sea of life', and that the programmes broadcast on that day should therefore ensure that 'the lamps are lit before the Lord and the message and music of eternity move through the infinities of the ether'.

As the social clubs and cinemas of Wales had demonstrated, however, a resourceful people could always find an alternative to the sober fare that resulted from such attitudes, and a number of foreign-based stations soon emerged, aiming their transmitters at Britain and broadcasting in English in the expectation of picking up advertising revenue (the BBC was, of course, a non-profit making enterprise that didn't air commercials). Among these foreign rivals were Radio Lyons, Radio Normandy, Radio Toulouse and, most famously, Radio Luxembourg, which started in 1933 and was within a few months broadcasting from noon to midnight. With the most powerful transmitter in Europe and the most expensive advertising space in the world, Luxembourg was seen as a threat by both the BBC and Fleet Street and was met with a complete news blackout in Britain: its schedules weren't included in the radio listings, and its existence was simply ignored. Nonetheless it soon attracted some five million listeners, proving particularly popular on the Sabbath; the BBC lost half its Sunday audience, and

survey showed that sixty per cent of listeners had acquired the habit of tuning into the continent stations.

The departure of Reith in 1938 allowed some relaxation of his rigorous standards – ‘I do not prefer to give the public what it wants,’ he had once proclaimed – but it was not until the outbreak of war in September 1939 that there was a genuine move to respond to the wishes and demands of the new mass audience. A second national channel was launched, aimed at those in uniform and known as the Forces Programme, with the existing channel being renamed the Home Service. Considerably lighter in tone than the BBC had previously allowed itself to be (the first show, on Sunday 7 January 1940, was a half-hour broadcast by Gracie Fields), the Forces Programme heralded a new era, with the radio becoming ever more influential.

The structure of the audience also changed. In the early days, listening to the radio had been primarily a communal, friends-and-family affair, so that the broadcast of George V’s speech opening the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924 had been heard by six million people, many times more than the number of receivers in the country; it was the first time in British history that a substantial section of the population had been able to hear their monarch’s voice and, apart from anything else, there was considerable interest in what he actually sounded like. But conditions were different now: most households boasted their own radio set, millions of men were away from home in the forces, and the continental competition had been snuffed out. (Luxembourg ceased broadcasting immediately after war was declared, making a return only when its facilities were taken over by the Germans and used to broadcast the propaganda of William Lord ‘Haw Haw’ Joyce.) In this world, the BBC acquired a new role, linking atomised households and individuals, making them feel part of a whole, and bringing them together under a common national banner; even the new king, George VI and his family were reported to be fans of the country’s biggest comedy shows, *Band Waggon* and *ITMA*. This was still a shared experience – particularly in those factories where radio was ever-present – but domestically its nature was evolving. The old image of a family congregated around a wireless set had, to some extent, been replaced by the solitary listener at home, conscious of the fact that he or she was a member of an audience comprising anonymous millions of others.

This was especially true of Nation and his contemporaries, the first generation to grow up with radio as a soundtrack to their lives. And of particular significance for this generation were two dramatic series, *Saturday Night Theatre* and *Appointment with Fear* (the latter memorably hosted by Valentin Dyall, the Man in Black), that started in 1943 and brought tales of mystery, detection and suspense to a cult audience. Together with occasional shows like *The Saint* (1940), adapted from the stories by Leslie Charteris, these were the first examples of broadcast drama to make a major impact. ‘They were very influential,’ reflected Brian Clemens. ‘I used to listen to them in the Blitz, because I lived in Croydon, which was heavily bombed, and I spent most of my sleeping time in an Anderson shelter or a Morrison shelter.’

Nation too lived in the shadow of the Blitz, with the first big air raid on Cardiff coming in January 1941, at the cost of more than 150 lives. ‘For over five hours German planes, sweeping over the city, dropped thousands of incendiaries and numerous high explosive bombs,’ reported the local paper while the account in *The Times* said the intensity of the firebombing was such ‘that it was possible to read a newspaper in the street’. Although the Luftwaffe saw the docks as its primary target, areas further inland were also hit: Llandaff Cathedral, a few hundred yards from the Nations’ home, was damaged so badly it was obliged to close its doors for fifteen months. The imagery of the Second World War and of the Nazis was to recur through much of Nation’s adult work, to such an extent that it was sometimes mocked by critics (‘a common Nation trait’, notes one guide to *The Avengers*

though it would perhaps have been more surprising if it hadn't been present. 'I was a wartime child,' he reflected. 'My dad went off to the army and my mother was an ARP, an air-raid warden. I was a only child and I used to spend nights alone in an air-raid shelter. And I would make up stories for myself – I was entertaining *me* in those days. There was no television, of course, but I used to listen to the radio, and I also read a great deal.'

It was that reading, intensified by the experience of the bombing, that did most to shape Nation's future writing. The range was diverse: there was some science fiction, primarily H.G. Wells and Jules Verne; there were detective stories, still dominated by Arthur Conan Doyle's tales of Sherlock Holmes, though augmented in the early 1940s by the sensational arrival of Raymond Chandler; there was horror literature, particularly the great myths of the late Victorians, *Dracula* and *Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, as well as the Edwardian ghost stories of M.R. James and W.W. Jacobs; and above all there was a rich vein of adventure stories that reached back to the likes of H. Rider Haggard and G. A. Henty and continued forward to John Buchan and C.S. Forester, as well as a host of their imitators.

This latter was a deep and exciting tradition for a boy in the 1930s and 1940s, celebrating quests to distant, exotic lands, and telling tales of tunnels and treasure maps, jungles and journeys, war and discovery. It had no interest in the bureaucratic administrators of later colonial fiction, looking rather to the glory days of frontier imperialism, when the world still lay spread out for the taking, if one only had the good fortune to be born British, with a streak of derring-do and a taste for pushing oneself to one's limits. Set in a world populated almost exclusively by men, though often with a boy at the centre of the narrative, these novels made it clear that true romance lay in loyalty and honour, rather than in love and women. The spirit of the knight errant was reborn on the African veldt, in the jungles and remote mountains of Asia, and on the high seas.

This was the heritage, the mythology that still loomed large, even though by the time of Nation's own childhood it seemed as though there was precious little left of such pioneering aspiration, particularly in the aftermath of the war that was supposed to end all wars, and that certainly – for a while at least – had ended the fictional romance of war. It was a long way from the heroic death of General Gordon, standing proud in the face of the Mahdi masses in faraway Khartoum, to the anonymous slaughter at Passchendaele, and as society struggled to adjust to that change, it seemed far less amenable to the old breed of hero. John Buchan's novel, *The Island off Sheep* (1936), the last to feature his secret agent Richard Hannay, begins with our hero on a suburban train in southern England, reminiscing about the great days at the turn of the century when 'the afterglow of Cecil Rhodes's speculation still lay on Africa, and men could dream dreams'. As he looks round the compartment at the 'flabby eupletic faces' of commuters returning home from the City, he reflects melancholically on the realities of modern Britain: 'Brains and high ambition had perished, and the world was for the comfortable folk like the man opposite me.'

In due course, a new generation of hero emerged from the pens of Sapper and others. Wealthy young men of action, they mostly operated in the high society of London in the inter-war years, though they were happy enough to step outside society's conventions of behaviour when justice demanded it. Stories featuring some of this new breed – Leslie Charteris's Simon Templar, aka the Saint, and John Creasey's Baron – were later to be adapted for television by Nation, but there always seemed to be a place in his heart for the previous generation, whose attitudes survived in the stories found in the boys' weekly magazines of the 1930s, the likes of *Wizard*, *Champion* and *Hotspur*. Here the Wild West still loomed larger than the Western Front, and the only acknowledgement of the recent war came in tales not of the trenches, but of the much more glamorous exploits of the Royal Flying Corps (Nation was a big fan of W.E. Johns's books about the air ace Biggles). The core of such

magazines were detective stories, tales of exploration, and colourful adventures that featured various on stock characters such as Tarzan and Robin Hood; there was little that couldn't have been found in the Edwardian era, save for the emergence, towards the end of the 1930s, of some science fiction magazines primarily concerned with space travel, Martians and death rays.

This adventure tradition, both in novels and magazines, dominated the reading of boys in the 1930s and Nation's love of it runs through his own writing. Its celebration of the spirit of adventure, of improvised resourcefulness, of the qualities of leadership, were to form the backbone to much of his own work, finding their happiest incarnation in the character of Jimmy Garland in *Survivors* – a joyously triumphant throwback to the world of Buchan. 'He's acting like a character from a boy's own adventure story,' snorts one of Garland's enemies. Indeed he was, and no one was more aware of it than Nation, whose writing resonated with echoes of this world.

Given his voracious reading ('I read everything that was available to me'), it wasn't long before Nation was making up his own stories, 'mostly with me as the hero'. Such a quality was not always appreciated in a society dominated by the very literal values of the church. 'I was always believed to be a terrible liar,' he said in later life. 'Nowadays they would say, "He's got a wonderful imagination" but in those days I was just "that liar".' On one occasion in school, the class was set the standard writing assignment of 'What I did on my holidays'. Having done nothing much, he wrote instead a fictional tale of a holiday on a barge. 'The teacher looked at me and said, "Were you on a barge, Nation?" I said, "No," and he said, "This is all bloody rubbish then, isn't it?"' The lack of encouragement seems to have done little to dissuade him. A friend, Harry Greene, who met him in 1945, recalls him telling stories that were 'often stretched beyond what was credible', as when he deliberately set out to scare Elsie White, wife of the verger Bob, with a tale about seeing a ghost through the window of Llandaff Cathedral.

His view of the schooling he received was to be seen in a passage from his original script for 'The Daleks' (though it was cut from the final version), in which the Doctor berates his companion, Ian Chesterton, for failing to understand the significance of the metal floors in the Dalek city. 'Chesterton, your total lack of imagination appals me. When I remember that you were a schoolmaster, it makes me glad that you are now here, and can no longer influence the minds of those poor unsuspecting children who were once your pupils.'

Nation's childhood absorption of influences was to change markedly following the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor and America's subsequent entry into the war. However remote those events may have appeared, it wasn't long before GIs were arriving in Britain, and with them came a new note in the cultural life of the country. Signs of an interest in American culture had already been apparent when the BBC Forces Programme began to air bought-in comedy shows such as *The Jack Benny Half Hour*, *The Bob Hope Programme* and *The Charlie McCarthy Show*, but the real breakthrough was the appearance of the American Forces Network (AFN), which started broadcasting from London on 1 July 1943 and was relayed around the country. 'They did transmissions of all the American shows I remembered Nation, 'and I'd hear Bob Hope, Jack Benny and all the big stars of that time. I loved the American sound, the jokes, the *feel*.'

He wasn't the only one to fall under the spell, for a whole generation of future writers was to find its tastes affected. 'We listened closely to American comedy shows transmitted on the American Forces Network in Europe,' remembered Frank Muir, one of the first new comedy writers to emerge after the war. 'We had a lot to learn from American radio comedy in those days.' Another of the coming men, Bob Monkhouse, would later talk about 'our personal pantheon of comedy gods like Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Jack Benny and Phil Silvers', and the Welsh comedian Wyn Calvin similarly

recognised the impact made by AFN: 'Youngsters with an ambition to be amusing were glued to those programmes. It gave them a new comedy, away from the variety programmes.'

The memory of those shows was to remain with Nation all his life, long after their direct influence had evaporated. Well into the late 1980s he was still jokingly claiming to be thirty-nine years old, running gag in Jack Benny's routines that he had first encountered in his childhood. But even more important was the stationing of large numbers of American troops in Cardiff. 'Suddenly there they were,' he recalled, 'with their ice cream, their chocolate and their comic books. Those wonderful American comic books became an influence, too. *Superman*, maybe *Batman* too. They were a great breath of fresh air after the *Dandy* and the *Beano*.' For the first time, the transient images of America that had illuminated the cinemas for the last decade and more were acquiring a tangible, physical presence; now there were holy relics of the promised land that could be handled and taken home, cherished and consumed.

The luxury of those items, the lavish size and quality of the comics in particular, was almost unimaginable to a child living in a country that had by now survived the worst of the Blitz, but was still struggling through on ration books and the occasional foray into the black economy. The publisher D.C. Thomson had begun something of a revolution in British comics in 1937 with the launch of the *Dandy*, followed swiftly by the *Beano* and by *Magic*, all of them cheerier and cheekier than their predecessors, but they faced a major setback with the outbreak of war. Paper in Britain was made primarily from wood pulp shipped from Scandinavia and, with the growing threat of U-boat attacks, such supplies were hard to come by. Newspapers voluntarily reduced their size by around fifty per cent in an attempt to preserve paper stocks, and children's comics were similarly hard hit; *Magic* disappeared entirely, and the *Beano* and *Dandy* switched from weekly to fortnightly publication, alternating with each other, while they too shrank in size. Other titles, popular with boys as well as adults, also went out of existence, including *Detective Weekly*, home of Sexton Blake, and *The Thriller*, which had nurtured gentlemen outlaws of the 1930s like the Saint, the Toff and Norman Conquest. In March 1940, just before the fall of Norway made the position even more precarious, the formal rationing of paper was introduced by the government.

By 1944 book production was at less than half its pre-war level, and educationalists were warning of a serious crisis as textbooks became ever more difficult to obtain. The situation had been exacerbated by the actions of the Luftwaffe, with an estimated 20 million volumes destroyed as a result of the bombing of Britain. Demand for books remained high, partly – it was argued – because of the need for escapism, and partly because the absence of so many goods from the shops meant that people had a higher disposable income than before the war, but there was a desperate shortage of supply. In that context, an American *Superman* comic would fall into the hands of a 13-year-old boy like Terry Nation as though it were manna from heaven. The child psychologist P.M. Pickard campaigned in the 1950s against the influence of the American comics, but even she recognised their appeal: 'The glossy paper, the brilliant colours and the clear type far outshone anything the war-surrounded children remembered ever seeing.' The contrast between the real experience of Britain and the fantasy images of America instilled a fascination with that country that was to dominate the post-war era, for Nation as for so many others.

Paper shortages continued after the end of the war. It wasn't until 1949 that Harold Wilson, the president of the Board of Trade, was able to announce that the rationing of paper was to end, by which time the damage had, for many, already been done. *Strand* magazine, where the likes of Sherlock Holmes and A.J. Raffles had made their first appearances, announced that year that it could no longer afford to continue, though the *Beano* and the *Dandy* had survived and were able to return to weekly publication.

publication. In the interim, the departure of the GIs had left a generation bereft, and the publishers American comics, having discovered that there was a voracious appetite in Britain, responded by flooding the country with imported material, to the immense annoyance of their rationed competitors. In the immediate post-war years, the entire British publishing trade was restricted to around 2,000 tons of paper per month, the same quantity that was being shipped in every year in the form of comics. For Nation, who remained an avid reader of the imports, the gulf between the American and British productions was now even more marked, with a clear age divide having opened up; it was not until 1950 and the launch of the *Eagle* that comic publishers at home recognised that there was a demand to be met not simply among children but among adolescents as well. And by then, although he was fond of the *Eagle*, it was really too late for him.

Nation celebrated his fifteenth birthday on the day that the Soviet Union declared war on Japan, the event that precipitated that country's surrender and finally brought the Second World War to a close. The previous month a General Election had swept out of power the Conservative administration of Winston Churchill and replaced it with a Labour government headed by Clement Attlee. Among its reforms were the creation of the National Health Service, under the guidance of South Wales's most famous politician, Aneurin Bevan, and the nationalisation of the mining industry; on New Year's Day 1947 notices appeared right across the country's coalfields proclaiming: 'This colliery is now managed by the National Coal Board on behalf of the people.' If that was to prove a little optimistic, it did at least reflect a desire that the hardship of the depression should never be allowed to happen again, and a similar feeling on the part of the five million men and women who had served in the armed forces that their sacrifices should lead to a more just society. When Spike Milligan, serving in the Italian campaign in 1943, believed that his death was imminent, he wrote himself an epitaph: 'I died for the England I dreamed of, not for the England I know.' Now was the time to build that new country.

The political mood for change was mirrored, though it was not as immediately apparent, by a determination on the part of the returning servicemen that culturally their voices should be heard, and it was on the radio, and particularly in comedy, that the resulting loose-knit movement was first to make its mark. In Wales it produced the revival of *Welsh Rarebit*, a radio series that had proved more popular in the principality even than Tommy Handley's *ITMA* during the war, and which was reborn in 1949 as an hour-long variety show. With its theme song of 'We'll Keep a Welcome in the Hill-sides' – written by the show's producer, Mai Jones – *Welsh Rarebit* went out on the Light Programme (as the Forces Programme had now been renamed) and became principally known as a showcase for new Welsh comedians including Harry Secombe, Stan Stennett and Wyn Calvin. 'Up until the advent of radio,' noted the latter, 'Wales had no reputation for comedy.' That was slightly overstating the case, but certainly the success of *Welsh Rarebit* – it even enjoyed a brief transfer to television in the 1950s – helped fuel the ambitions of those in South Wales with aspirations towards becoming entertainers, among them Terry Nation: 'I wanted to be a comedian. I wanted to be a stand-up.'

On leaving school Nation had joined his father's furniture business, working – not very well, he would later admit – as a salesman. One of the few benefits of this position was that he had a justification for fussing over his wardrobe, in which pride of place went to a leather-buttoned, Harris tweed jacket. 'He was always dressed beautifully,' remembered his friend Harry Greene (who worked as an unpaid assistant on *Welsh Rarebit*). 'I don't know if it was hand-me-downs from his dad, because Bert was a good dresser as well. I think that was part of his front for selling.' The work meant that he had money in his pocket, but Nation was already preoccupied with dreams of performance. He remained passionate about film, becoming a member of the Cardiff Amateur Cine Society, while engaging in



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