

## Christie's British Social History No Mystery

By Linda of London



I was invited to a group of Agatha Christie fans who meet regularly on Queen Anne to view the PBS mystery series and discuss the author. I was delighted to present the following.

Although Agatha Christie wrote stories from the time of her childhood, it was not until World War I, while working in a hospital dispensary, that she wrote her first published book, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, (1920). This work began her career as a prolific writer of mystery stories. Her mysteries are noted for clever and surprising twists of plot and for the creation of two unconventional fictional detectives. Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. Poirot is the hero of many of her works, including *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), which is considered a classic of modern detective fiction.

While traveling in the Middle East, Agatha Christie met the British archeologist Max Edgar Lucien Mallowan who was assisting in the excavation of the city of Ur. They were married in 1930 and from that time on Agatha Christie accompanied her husband on annual trips to Iraq and Syria. She used the expeditions as material for three of her novels: *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1930), *Death on the Nile* (1937) & *Appointment With Death* (1938).

Most of her more than 80 books have been best sellers translated into every modern language and serialized on PBS. Her novel *Passenger to Frankfurt* (1970) is about four simultaneous airplane hijackings. Her plays include *The Mousetrap*, produced continuously in London since 1952 and *Witness for the Prosecution*. The latter was produced in 1953 for which she received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best foreign play of 1954-55. In 1971 she was made a Dame Commander (equivalent of Sir) of the Order of the British Empire.

What makes her mysteries so enduringly popular? The answer lies partly in Christie's exciting and original plots and partly in her ever fresh and varied characters and settings. From Christie's first novel published in 1920, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, to her last *Sleeping Murder* (1976), the author demonstrated a keen eye in reporting on the character of the British and the changes wrought on the country by two wars.

Some of Christie's characters and their motives exist only in the novels of certain eras. Her earliest mysteries of the '20s are populated by pukka sahib military men, wild-eyed Bolsheviks, and self-made 'Amurrican' millionaires from Pittsburgh. As the years pass, these characters give way to neo-Nazi arch-villains, ex-R.A.F. flyers, the Teddies of the late '50s, and even the young hippies of the '60s. Unlike her contemporary, P.G. Wodehouse, whose comedies remained forever set in the early '20s, Christie used these changing character types to add a timely context to her novels.

In some cases the exotic setting of the quixotic character merely provides background interest. More frequently, however, the detailed observations of some facet of society are a key part of the plot, providing either motive or means to murder. For example, Christie set her first mystery, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, in the large country house so beloved by mystery writers. But Styles Court, while well staffed with butler, cook and numerous housemaids, shows already the beginnings of decay away from Edwardian elegance and prosperousness. While before the war the family used to employ five men in the garden, now they have only an old man, a boy and a new-fashioned woman gardener in breeches.

Neither gas light nor electric has reached the countryside yet; the inhabitants of Styles Court roam about in the night with candles, and this fact provides two of the most important clues. A blot of candle grease on the carpet of the murdered woman's room, and the fact that she called for a fire on the hottest day of summer, lead the detective and the reader to their triumphant conclusion.

Christie introduces her most famous detective, Hercule Poirot, in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. He is on the scene as one of a number of Belgian war refugees quartered in the village, where he serendipitously meets his old friend Hastings, a 'so-correct' English gentleman invalidated home from the Front. Hastings will appear in only a few subsequent novels. Evidently, Christie found his bluff, old-school-tie mannerisms (and perhaps his Watson-like obtuseness) difficult to maintain.

The Christie mysteries of the '20s and

'30s are populated with Bright Young Things filled with "S.A." and "IT". They're witty and sharp in the new modern manner, a style befitting the era of Cubism and Futurism. In *Poirot Loses a Client*, Poirot has a difficult time getting to talk to people in the village, since several of them think that he is one of the ubiquitous door-to-door salesmen so common in the jobless period after WWI. In her autobiography Christie mentions how hard it was to turn some of these down-on-their-luck veterans away.

Cocaine-called 'snow' in its first wave of popularity as a drug of the 'Smart Set' appears as a theme in many of Christie's novels and short stories of this period. She employs cocaine both as a method of murder in *Peril At End House*, and also as a motive in *Death in the Air* (1935) and in various short stories collected in *Partners in Crime* (1929) and the *Mysterious Mr. Quinn* (1930). Drug enforcement laws then successfully suppressed cocaine as a popular drug until its reappearance in the '80s; consequently, it disappears as a theme from Christie's later works.

In the late '20s, divorce was still a scandalous and shocking event and was granted only if there was proof of infidelity. This attitude is mirrored in Christie's seventh mystery, *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (published in 1928 soon after the author's own well publicized divorce from Captain Archibald Christie). Here, the American millionaire (a Stock character who says 'I guess' and 'sure' and waves dollar bills in the bemused faces of the British) is urging his daughter, Ruth Van Aldin, to divorce her ne'er-do-well husband. In a few economical words, Christie's tone reveals everything about the attitude of the time: "Cut your losses and start afresh"

You mean-  
Divorce.  
Divorce!"

Offhand commentaries on life in post-war England are scattered like plums in a pudding throughout Christie's works of this period. In the course of Miss Marple's first appearance in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), it was clear to Agatha Christie that village life had changed. The Cavendish family of Styles Court would be lucky to have an odd-job man twice a week

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in the fifties. These changes are most clearly depicted in *A Murder Is Announced* (1950). Here we learn that most young Englishwomen are working in factories rather than going into service. Miss Blacklock therefore employs Mitzi, a pugnacious Middle European maid/cook with an extraordinary accent, who of course comes provided with a motive and means to murder. The war has scattered the young people of the house and now they are brought back together again, they hardly remember the calm and leisure of pre-war life. Most importantly, as Miss Marple points out, war has torn apart village life; 'the subtler links that had held English social rural life together had fallen apart.' Fifteen years earlier, everyone in the village knew everyone else; strangers brought letters of introduction or at least had been in the same regiment or on the same ship.



The identity cards and ration books of post-war England just didn't work the same way-and, as usual, Christie employs this observation as an integral part of her plot. The mystery hinges on this disintegration of society. Are all the young people-newcomers to the village-precisely who they say they are? Three murders occur before we find out.

In the '50s and '60s, Christie makes passing references to communist witch-hunts in America, atomic bombs and the Cold War. These events provide the backdrop for mysteries such as *So Many Steps To Death*, *The Clocks* (1963) and *Passage to Frankfurt* (1970). The reader can sense, however, a growing discomfort on Christie's part with some of these changes in society. Her detectives, Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, make more frequent comments about how much better life used to be.

Christie herself seems to have



been aware of the contemporaneous quality of her plots. In the preface to *Passenger To Frankfurt* (1970), one of her last mysteries, she attempted to answer the question of where she found her plots and characters:

"You don't invent your settings. They are outside you, all around you, in existence...Real people, real places. A definite place in time and space...To write a story in this year of our Lord 1970-you must come to terms with your background. If the background is fantastic, then the story must accept its background. The setting must include the fantastic facts of daily life."

The enduring qualities of her mysteries prove her point. The next time you settle down to a Christie mystery, check the publication date and test how many pieces of 'social history' you spot. Better yet, spend a some time rereading all of Christie in chronological order, and enjoy watching British society unfold from 1920 to 1976.

TTFN, *Linda of London*



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We encourage other members to also write articles for us which might be of interest to our members pertaining to costuming, music, dining, etc.

Lady Victoria