



# LONDON'S BURNING

Pulp Fiction, the Politics of Terrorism and the Destruction  
of the Capital in British Popular Culture, 1840 – 2005

ANTHONY TAYLOR

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*To Marsha Healy*



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## *Abbreviations*

ARP	Air-Raid Precaution
ASU	Anti-Socialist Union
BUF	British Union of Fascists
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
ILP	Independent Labour Party
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IWMA	International Workingmen's Association
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PLO	Palestine Liberation Army
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SNP	Scottish National Party
TUC	Trades Union Congress
US/UK	United States/United Kingdom
WEA	Workers' Educational Association
WITCH	We Intend to Create Havoc

## *Acknowledgements*

This book has been a number of years in the making. What began as a relatively modest study of a number of little-known texts on anarchism grew remorselessly into an analysis of popular fiction, its relationship to national political decline and further importance in the formation of attitudes towards the capital. Inevitably I have accumulated a large number of debts (academic and personal) along the way. Thanks go in particular to Chris Hopkins at Sheffield Hallam University, for suggesting avenues of research and little-known texts, and then patiently listening to my misreadings of them. Thanks too to Mary Grover and to the Middlebrow Network at Sheffield Hallam, for the stimulating forum for debate they have made available to scholars interested in the intersections between literature and history over the years. My especial thanks go to John Baxendale, who, in his work on J.B. Priestley, has blazed a trail to demonstrate the ways in which historians can intrude on the study of literature. His influence is apparent in this book during the course of numerous conversations over a malfunctioning photocopier. Thanks as well to literary specialists at Sheffield Hallam who have shared their expertise with me, notably Sue McPherson, and Steve Earnshaw. My particular thanks go to Gill Campbell, who has reminded me throughout the research for this book that many of the volumes cited are of dubious literary merit, and there are better books out there to read. Perhaps I'll do that now! Thanks too to Martin Carter for his insights as a genuine Londoner and to participants in the 'Lost London: Explorations of a Dark Metropolis' conference at Sheffield Hallam in June 2010 for ideas emerging during the course of the conference. I'd also like to thank my fellow historian of nineteenth-century radicalism, Matt Roberts, for his input and suggestions for further reading, and Karen Morton, my co-teacher on the 'London: Literary and Historical Perspectives' module at Sheffield Hallam for her enthusiasm for the project and her interest in all things metropolitan. Thanks as well to Livi Michael for her encouragement. Thanks in particular to Fergus Wilde, and to Chetham's Library, Manchester, for their help with the illustrations. This book only looks the way it does as a result of Fergus's hard work on the presentation of the pictures. Above all, my thanks go to my partner, Marsha Healy, for her insights, wisdom and companionship over the years. I dedicate this book to her.

## *Introduction*

The traffic murmured sleepily in the distance. How nearly it had come, thought Bond, to being stilled. How nearly there might be nothing now but the distant clang of the ambulance bells beneath a lurid black and orange sky, the stench of burning, the screams of people still trapped in the buildings. The softly beating heart of London silenced for a generation. And a whole generation of her people dead in the streets amongst the ruins of a civilisation that might not rise again for centuries.<sup>1</sup>

The destruction of London has been more often imagined than seriously contemplated. From the early years of the nineteenth century, cultural pessimists imagined the political forces that might bring about a destruction of the metropolis. Much of this dystopic material traded in images of political and social upheaval. Periods of popular protest or radical activity generated fiction that considered the methods and tactics insurgents might use to bring the city to its knees. In highpoints of such concern in the 1840s and 1850s, in the 1890s, in the 1930s and in the 1970s and 2000s, writers have allowed their imagination free rein in describing the aftermaths of terrorist attacks, anarchist bomb plots, Bolshevik revolutionary upheavals or the consequences of a right-wing putsch. Confined usually to the pages of popular fiction, there has been a tendency to dismiss such writings as the lurid imaginings of the pulp novel market. Dismissed as a 'literature for the masses' until recently, these books received almost no serious critical attention. They certainly don't merit literary acclaim. Yet recent work on spy thrillers and detective fiction has demonstrated the extent to which popular fears and moral panics about the security of the metropolis find a place in these usually overlooked musings. Drawing on popular literature from authors like Pierce Egan Jr., Edgar Wallace, through 'Sapper' to John Burmeister, in work that is usually omitted from the canon, this book seeks to re-evaluate the contribution of popular fiction to the construction of the terrorist threat. It analyses the highpoints for the production of such works and locates them in their cultural and political context. From the 1840s, when a fear of Chartist insurgency was paramount in the minds of authors, this book moves through the anarchist thrillers of the 1890s to 1900s, considers the fears about Bolshevik revolution in the East End that obsessed writers of the 1920s and 1930s, explores British fears of Fascism in the inter-war years and

assesses the concerns with underground counter-cultural forms that feature in the thriller literature of the 1970s. It concludes with a re-evaluation of the metropolitan background to the figure of the Islamist terrorist. A 'deep' reading of the fears that surround the figure of the militant Islamist demonstrate that the image of the terrorist is mediated through numerous prior visions of terrorism in London with roots in cultural constructions of anarchism and direct action radicalism dating from the 1890s and before.

## I

The vision of a destroyed and decimated London imagined by James Bond in *Moonraker* is in a long tradition. Perhaps the most traditional of Ian Fleming's Bond books, both in its setting and in the nature of the threat faced by Londoners, *Moonraker* drew unashamedly on memories of the Blitz and on the thriller fiction of the 1890s. The images used by Fleming emerged from a common pool of popular fiction that provided the threads linking Bond with older pulp heroes like Bulldog Drummond and villainous enemies familiar to himself and to many of his readers from his Edwardian boyhood.<sup>2</sup> The threat of a destruction of the capital and the impact it might have both on the empire and on British interests abroad provided a long-standing motif. The object of pulp villains from Fu Manchu through to the repellent ex-Nazi Hugo Drax in *Moonraker*, the imagined destruction of the capital represented the collapse of British power, authority, cultural values and moral leadership. The avowed aim of the majority of pulp villains was to plunge Britain into a new age of barbarism.<sup>3</sup> Following 7/7, such fears have resurfaced in response to the emergence of a militant Islamist terrorist threat. This volume grows out of recent academic interest in terrorism and the impact of terror on popular sentiment and media opinion. In the wake of 9/11, numerous books have appeared on terrorism (by John Gray, Paul Berman and Michael Ignatieff, in particular), but none have adopted a thoroughgoing historical approach.<sup>4</sup> The existing histories of terrorism are often partial, polemical and impressionistic. In its examination of the much-overlooked genre of popular fiction and discussion of its relationship to the history of the capital, this book explores new avenues in the understanding of popular literature. Unusually for a history-based study, this book crosses disciplinary boundaries. It seeks to connect the history of terrorist threats in Britain with recent debates about the ways in which historians approach the task of using literary sources. In addition, it locates the image of the terrorist in the work of those currently reappraising popular fiction as a cultural product. In so doing, this book draws on a range of other disciplines including sociology, urban studies and political theory. The pertinence of the book's key

themes – Britishness, urban identity, fear of terrorism – place it at the centre of debates about identity, popular culture and recent political threat.

This, then, is not a conventional account of terrorism and political militancy in London. Its object is to chart the course and direction of popular fears. In so doing it examines material that is traditionally ignored or overlooked. By these means, it arrives at a highly unorthodox view of popular politics. This book draws primarily on popular fiction. It seeks to re-evaluate its importance for historians working on local, regional, national and imperial identities in the twenty-first century. The novels of prolific popular writers such as Edgar Wallace, Arthur Sarsfield Ward, Ian Fleming, John Buchan and Dennis Wheatley have long inspired their own enthusiasts.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the heroes that have emerged from such material have often established themselves as popular and culturally significant icons in their own right. Such books, however, are only intermittently read for indications of how they negotiate and present shifting conceptions of national and imperial strength and for the national, racial and political ideas that underpinned these notions.<sup>6</sup> Recent years have seen a renewed interest in popular literature on the part of historians. Once derided as the poorer end of the literary marketplace, unworthy of academic study, popular fiction is now read as a manifestation of popular identity and as a cultural phenomenon in its own right. Works of popular fiction are no longer dismissed simply for their variable literary merit, but for the first time are beginning to be examined for the light they shed on political sentiments and social trends.<sup>7</sup> Study of this material opens up possibilities for a new analysis that stresses the manifestations of popular opinion, imperial ideas and the cultural identities carried by popular novels and serializations. The sheer volume of popular fiction and the genres it spans provides opportunities to consider the inter-related nature of culture and the ways in which different visions of British identities serve to undermine or to consolidate one another. In a different sphere, whilst there has been a renewed interest in regional and metropolitan identities in recent years, this has not been matched by an adequate reappraisal of the popular works that represent such identities. Much yet remains to be done in linking the work of pulp fiction authors to audiences, whilst questions persist about the degree to which the messages underpinning such fiction found wider support or otherwise.

These concerns fix the chronology of the book. Beginning in the 1840s, it draws on arguments about the emergence of a recognizably modern publishing market. In its analysis of the content of popular fiction, this book sits broadly in agreement with Philip Waller, by placing the origins of mass publishing in the middle years of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Throughout, it follows Ian Haywood, in seeing the place of origin for many of the forms and styles of popular literature in the expansion of popular print media in Victorian Britain

after the repeal of the 'taxes on knowledge' and the failure of the 'moral middles' either to police or to stem the flood of cheap publications.<sup>9</sup> Taking the 1840s as an optimum period for the growth and development of techniques for the production of popular, garish and widely consumed mass market publications, it analyses the fears and popular concerns that marked out the sensationalist terrain and content of this material. Thereafter it follows such material through to the explosion of the cheap paperback market in the 1970s and recent lurid imaginings of terrorism in popular fiction.

In itself, this book is not simply another study of terrorism. It offers few insights into the reasons for individual acts of terrorism, or for the dynamic behind terrorist networks, organization and initiatives more broadly. It does, however, provide a generalized definition of terrorism for the purposes of this study. In line with Walter Laqueur's seminal study, *The New Terrorism*, it chooses to interpret terrorism very broadly indeed.<sup>10</sup> Spanning movements of the right, and the left, and taking cognisance of religious and secular variations to terrorism, this book represents terrorism as a fanatical form of politics, reliant on extreme displays of political violence and utilising sophisticated technological methods of destruction to bring about its aims. The anarchist groups discussed in Chapter 2 fit conventionally into this framework, but movements like Bolshevism, Irish republican terrorism and extreme sub-cultures amongst some student militants are also included on the grounds that their subversive and conspiratorial forms of organization locate them within a recognizably distinct world of 'underground' political forms. Following Laqueur, this book includes a chapter on Fascism (Chapter 4), on the basis that under certain circumstances, Fascism's emphasis on demonstrative violence leads it to imitate the subversive political format of movements of the militant and conspiratorial left.<sup>11</sup> Al-Qaeda and Islamist extremism fit firmly into a spectrum of terrorism in which the primary motivations are religious rather than secular. To interpret what radicals themselves thought about political violence in their own writings, this book includes an opening chapter on the historical memory of peasant revolt amongst reformers in Britain. As Laqueur allows, along the way terrorism can take many forms, from the state-directed, through the inventive, to the exotic, often making it explicable only in comparative terms.<sup>12</sup> It is to be hoped that this volume appraises some of these different dimensions to a complex phenomenon.

## II

In Britain, London, rather than the regional centres, provided the backdrop to the apocalyptic visions contained in such material. A further function of

the arguments presented here is to provide a contribution to recent cultural debates on the role and position of London during periods of perceived political threat. For this reason, this book gauges the importance of the metropolitan background to terrorist thriller literature more generally and considers the neuroses surrounding historical debates about the vulnerability of the capital to attack. It concludes by considering the importance of previous generations of thriller writers to the cultural construction of the threat posed by al-Qaeda, and the reactions of media and fiction writers to the London bombings of July 2005. This volume is not a literary treatment of the books under consideration, but, rather, provides a reading of the popular fiction market historicized in its cultural context, while assessing audiences, key themes and cultural responses to it. The book is strongly rooted both in the political and in the historical contexts it describes. It reflects a burgeoning interest in all things metropolitan, mirrored in the proliferation of material on London geared towards a more popular audience and a revival of interest in the local history of the capital. There are other books on terrorism, but this one revisits the subject and returns it to its urban context. This book might also be seen as a contribution to recent re-evaluations of London that highlight the hidden cultural and political dangers of the metropolis.<sup>13</sup>

This book is not primarily a study of genre. Nevertheless, the material examined throughout this study falls loosely into the category labelled popular crime fiction, or the thriller form. Such material has a long provenance and bequeathed a significant legacy for inter-war and post-war writers. Widely read, but frequently held in contempt, these books demonstrate a lineage of form and ideas that take their origins back into the world of mid-Victorian sensationalist fiction. Most standard accounts of thrillers and spy fiction place their point of origin in the 1890s and the years before and after the Great War. Anthony Hope, H. Rider Haggard, William Le Queux and John Buchan are often seen as grandfathers of the genre. As Allan Hepburn comments, this period was formative both for the style and content of popular fiction, dealing, as it often did, with spies and shadowy conspirators who transcended national boundaries, crossed frontiers at will, spoke numerous languages and adopted multiple identities and disguises. Such books posit the external threat of invasion from without, matched by duplicity and treachery by unreliable elements from within.<sup>14</sup> As Michael Denning notes, in many ways, these books were a counterpoint to the traditional imperial adventure story, acting as a compensatory and consolatory literature for a Britain past her imperial zenith and reflecting the country's global contraction.<sup>15</sup> As Kevin Foster has commented, the figure of the spy became both 'a symbol and the source for national decline'.<sup>16</sup> Most of these novels and the majority of the works cited throughout this volume might be seen as occupying the same space as the output of



Edgar Wallace that Dorothy L. Sayers categorized as 'the purely sensational'.<sup>17</sup> Such authors were seen as venal and in thrall to debased popular tastes. A. R. Orage captured this sentiment in his view of Wallace as 'the counterpart of the profiteer'.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, these books held a peculiar fascination for many contemporary writers. George Orwell spoke of 'good bad books', and Graham Greene in particular sought to inject a greater depth of characterization, plot and a more rigorous standard of writing into the traditional detective and thriller form. He again quoted Le Queux, Anthony Hope and John Buchan as instrumental and formative in the development of his writing.<sup>19</sup>

Despite literary curiosity about the genre, Britain has never either embraced or exalted its popular fiction writers. Embarrassing, unrespectable and with few pretensions to acceptability, they are the epitome of the 'low brow'. Recent interest in the 'middle brow' grows out of a tacit sense of the exclusion of this literary form and constitutes an attempt to reclaim some authors (but not others) for the canon. Contemporary notions of the 'middle brow' have problematized popular fiction. The lack of consensus about the 'middle brow' itself reveals continuing confusion about literary form and style, and demonstrates little more than a widespread rejection of Bloomsbury and modernism. Popular fiction, whilst sharing some of these traits, lacked the middle brow's sense of seriousness, embrace of self-consciously archaic styles and overweening self-importance. Equally, popular fiction fits uneasily into the reading material seen as shaping the development of respectable, aspirational and self-improving working-class culture.<sup>20</sup> For Orwell, an exciting fusion of low and middle brow was possible in the muddle of genres and literary product he encountered in Francis and Myfanwy Westrope's 'Booklovers' Corner' bookshop in the 'social borderland' of Hampstead and Chelsea in the 1930s. For him it provided a heady brew of the popular and the didactic, frequently reflected in his own writing.<sup>21</sup> For most authors, however, these books and writers inhabit a space that Richard Hoggart believed belonged alongside the liminal, the marginal and the transient in popular culture. In *The Uses of Literacy* he describes a profusion of literature including serial shockers, cheap novels, 'sex-books', pulp fiction and hobby magazines circulating as part of a polyglot form that flourished in station bookstalls and was freely available to the commuting and travelling public:

The 'blood-and-guts' sex novelettes can be bought not only from the 'magazine shops' but from some railway-bookstalls. They are usually in a corner, all together, lying beneath the cards of aspirin and the styptic pencils. There are the dailies and weeklies, the welter of little 'hobbies' and 'handicrafts' magazines, the Penguins and the Pelicans; and then the sex-novelettes – they all make a picture of some of the stresses within our culture.<sup>22</sup>

This literary product overlapped with a burgeoning industry of authorship. As Christopher Hilliard has demonstrated, the inter-war and immediate post-war years were a period in which amateur authors prospered. Large numbers of aspiring writers sought to learn the writers' craft at reading circles, in correspondence courses and in regional writers' groups. Some of these figures achieved some limited success, but most remained in obscurity.<sup>23</sup> As Hilliard comments, these figures often eschewed traditional approaches to literature; a number of them were willing to experiment with style and form, contributing to the modernist departures in literature after World War II.<sup>24</sup> Many simply added to the weight of traditional thrillers and poor crime fiction in circulation that became a staple of the British reading public's diet, pre- and post-World War II. Few of the authors cited in this book may be seen as displaying literary merit, whereas many fall into the bracket of journeyman authorship or aspiring hack writers, but only a very few received plaudits for their work. Some like Dennis Wheatley and Cyril McNeile are notorious and have become by-words for the worst excesses of the popular thriller form. 'Pulp', when the term is used in Britain at all, refers to authors of this nature and calibre.

A strong point of contrast emerges here with regard to the United States. There the term 'pulp' as a description of popular fiction is far more frequently employed. The British disdain for low-brow fiction is to some extent inspired by a dislike of American paperback novels and their penetration into the British fiction market in the years before and after World War II on the back of a stream of cheap US imports.<sup>25</sup> Characterized by poor production values, cheap paper and garish illustrations, for contemporaries in Britain, this material embodied the worst aspects of American popular culture. The term 'trash fiction' is sometimes used to describe it. In the United States, responses to 'pulp' are very different. Attitudes to 'pulp' fiction oscillated, between affection and fear, finding their natural level after the 'Red Scares' surrounding the effect of horror comics on adolescents ended in the 1950s.<sup>26</sup> These days, pulp fiction evokes nostalgia and is often celebrated, rather than derided. Pulp writers like Ayn Rand and L. Ron Hubbard have attained major followings and taken their place on a podium within a 'pulp' hall of fame. Their influence in the world of ideas in the United States is out of all proportion to the quality of their literary product and their abilities as writers or social visionaries. On the back of a much greater acceptance of thrillers, science fiction and the lower end of the literary marketplace in the United States, writers there have shown themselves more prepared than their British counterparts to adapt and to experiment with the forms and styles of popular fiction. Philip Roth, in particular, has demonstrated that there is great potential in plundering established plots from science fiction and invasion panic novels to explore and decode particular historical episodes.<sup>27</sup> Much imitated for their brash, salacious and 'hard-boiled' elements,

the proliferation of popular fiction 'pulp' derived from the American model, traditionally stoked fears about a coarsening of style amongst British thriller writers.<sup>28</sup> Pulp proper in Britain might be seen as encompassing the works of semi-pornographic and titillating writers like Hank Janson and the 'yellow-backs' of the 1930s. In the inter-war years 'pulp' elements migrated upwards into the crime fiction genre. Writers like Eric Ambler, who aspired to something more original in the fiction they produced, acknowledged their debt to this material. In his 1936 novel, *The Dark Frontier*, the novel's hero, Henry Barstow, is involved in a car accident. Following a head injury, he spends the remainder of the novel convinced that he is the hero of a detective novel he reads in the hotel before his accident. The moment of discovery of the book is an important one in the novel: 'It lay open, face downward, displaying the full expanse of a bright yellow jacket. One half of this was devoted to a list of the publisher's other offerings while, on the front cover, above a three-colour reproduction of a lantern-jawed man with a blue jowl and an automatic pistol, was the title, in blood red letters: CONWAY CARRUTHERS, DEPT. T.'<sup>29</sup> In Britain, 'pulp' remains defiantly unrespectable. It is usually labelled as 'crime fiction' or thriller writing, but also has a manifestation in popular romance stories. As Clive Bloom has demonstrated, an energy, vibrancy and vigour is common to both British and American popular crime writing. For him, this strong overlap in style and content is indicative of a transatlantic definition of 'pulp' in which definable characteristics recur.<sup>30</sup> For Bloom, the category of 'pulp' is a portable one, useful in both British and American contexts. Bloom defines it as a 'lower grade literature' that symbolizes 'a type of infiltration by hackdom into the realm of the sacred (that is the serious novel)'.<sup>31</sup> This book follows the notion of a pulp marketplace in fiction that circulated (and still circulates) widely in the United Kingdom, whilst drawing on numerous constituencies of readership. Despite the ubiquity of such material, its exclusion from the canon and traditional concerns about the demeaning and degrading experience of those readers exposed to it means that it remains a largely un-researched area of study. Such novels, nevertheless, traditionally act as a vector for many of the popular concerns of the periods. As Bloom shows, there is something gleeful and irreverent about these books in both a British and American context.<sup>32</sup> The themes and ideas they consider provide a unique insight into the popular mindset. In 1941, at the time of a potential German invasion of Britain, it was to popular authors like Jules Verne that contemporaries turned to make sense of the situation.<sup>33</sup> Easily transferable, dealing in only a limited number of plots and ideas, their contribution has allowed for a context in which alternative versions of British politics, British identities and even possible futures and apocalypses might be explored. It is this genre that provides the bulk of the reference material for the study that follows.

The setting and landscape of London looms large in much of this material. London provided the appropriate background to crime fiction, political thrillers, studies in governmental corruption and police stories. Here well-known public landmarks and disparities of wealth and power gave a recognizable context to plot devices and characterizations rooted in the experience of living in or knowing the capital. Thriller writers reflected the varying moods of London, from the quietness and respectability of the suburbs through to the noise and vulgarity of the East End and the superficiality and glitz of the West End and the City. Fogs, crowds, squalor, plenty and want feature markedly in the work of authors like Margery Allingham. The fusion of a recognizable landscape and the established image of metropolitan rootlessness are typified by the demobilized, armed and unemployed ex-servicemen who run amok in her classic study of post-war criminality, *The Tiger in the Smoke*:

Meanwhile, Crumb Street, never a place of beauty, that afternoon was at its worst. The fog slipped over its low houses like a bucketful of cold soup over a row of dirty stoves. The shops had been mean when they had been built and were designed for small and occasional trade, but since the days of victory, when a million men had passed through the terminus, each one armed with a parcel of government-presented garments of varying usefulness, half the establishments had been taken over by opportunists specialising in the purchase and sale of secondhand clothes. Every other window was darkened with festoons of semi-respectable rags based by bundles of grey household linen, soiled suitcases, and an occasional collection of surplus war stores, green khaki, and air-force blue.<sup>34</sup>

For the crime writer Peter Cheyney, London was quite simply the capital of the underworld with all the moral failings that this statement implied. In *The Urgent Hangman*, his detective hero, Callaghan, muses: 'For a few moments he saw London objectively. Saw it in a glance mainly consisting of two parts – a very thin upper crust and a damn thick lower one. The upper crust was the veneer of respectability, 'niceness', cleanliness, which London showed the world; the lower crust – the thick one – all the rottenness, cheap crookery, and general lousiness that existed in that jungle in the heart of the metropolis whose boundaries are known to every intelligent police officer.'<sup>35</sup>

### III

The destruction and moral squalor of London is a major theme in much of this material. There is a long lineage to these visions. The great fire of 1666,

often attributed to a Catholic conspiracy, was frequently cited as evidence of the fragility of the city when faced with a natural disaster or political violence. Thereafter, the unprecedented growth and expansion of the city in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries inspired numerous fantasies about its downfall. Since the writings of Macaulay and the etchings of Gustave Doré, images of London's destruction were always contained within its success as a city. In the eighteenth century, it was a commonplace to depict London as a 'Babylon' or a 'new Rome' built on slavery and suffering, rooted in unsustainable bursts of commerce, and inevitably destined to decline into barbarism.<sup>36</sup> Pride and vanity, it was believed, characterized the sophisticated urban dweller, blinding him to the possible fate of his endeavours. In many cultural readings, London was portrayed as a place of low morals, poised to collapse into impotent decadence and disintegration or brought low from attacks by new vandals and barbarians. From the eighteenth century onwards, there were fears that the success of London was unsustainable, making the capital vulnerable to riotous behaviour by the excluded, or to attack from great power rivals. The rapidity of social change, the upheaval of nineteenth century re-building programmes and the unprecedented expansion of London outwards meant that the capital was about erasure, creating a cityscape dominated by the ruins of its past. As Lynda Nead remarks, London at the height of its growth and power in the nineteenth century 'was also possessed by dystopic visions of its future'.<sup>37</sup> Lord Macaulay best typified this outlook. In 1840, his review of Von Ranke's *History of the Popes* speculated whether a New Zealander, returning from the colonies in the distant future, would still find the Church of Rome standing. The image was a potent one, taken up and adapted by writers and authors to imagine a lone colonial visitor inspecting and recording the ruins of London following an unspecified apocalypse in a dim and distant future.<sup>38</sup> This vision of national and social collapse became a convention, drawing on the ideas of writers like Volney, and presenting an admonitory rebuke to proud and avaricious Londoners in periods of national peril like the American War of Independence.<sup>39</sup> As Patrick Wright has observed of the twentieth century, many of the images of London rebuilt, remodelled or reconceptualized by conservationists, town planners, architects and literary pedestrians are contingent upon the city's destruction in the first instance.<sup>40</sup>

Many of the fictional destructions of London mimic the destructions imagined for other major cities. Prophetic destructions of iconic urban centres occur throughout the Anglophone world. From the inter-war period onwards, authors like Oswald Spengler predicted the demise of urban civilization. In his *Decline of the West*, written in 1918, he announced that human society had reached an unsustainable plateau of civilized urban culture in the great cities of Europe and North America, but was destined to fall back into barbarism

and self-immolation.<sup>41</sup> As Max Page comments with regard to contemporary visions of the destruction of New York, certain themes recur in relation to images of urban catastrophe. In periods of crisis, London, like New York, bore the weight of catastrophic expectation. Britain, as in the United States, shares a ruralist image of the nation, dislikes cosmopolitan complexity and harbours a fear of unregulated urban expansion, and the immigration that accompanies it. For many writers who deal with the destruction of London, the city displays an ambiguous relationship with 'Englishness'. It provided an anti-England of cosmopolitanism, immigration, race-mixing and unpatriotic values.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, as with New York, London is a 'provisional' city, in which demolition and re-building creates constantly shifting vistas of change.<sup>43</sup> This process fostered a sense of the transience and impermanence of urban space. Significantly, both New York and London are financial centres that are often subject to environmental and political violence in fiction and cinema, highlighting the fragility of financial markets and the disruption of the institutions and services that depend upon them. As in depictions of the destruction of New York, the collapse of London releases uncontrolled crowd violence and mob behaviour, destroys financial stability (and the seat of government) and presages disarray in communications and the stability of other urban centres. As Page points out, such themes demonstrate the most grudging type of acceptance of big-city finance, acknowledging the necessity for such centres, but speculating about a society no longer dependant on them.<sup>44</sup>

Strongly embedded in popular culture, many of these predictions for the political and social collapse of the capital had implications for the fate of empire. Imperial themes were consonant with the tradition of a decayed and decrepit London. The city's pre-eminence was an expression of the country's imperial reach and power. Her financial and trading culture was coloured by an imperial swagger. The 'heart of the empire' and characterized by monuments to imperial endeavour and overseas adventurism, the collapse of London would herald the obliteration of British overseas interests.<sup>45</sup> The twin themes of the collapse of London and the disintegration of empire frequently took a parallel route. Rome was frequently invoked as a proxy for the decline of the British empire.<sup>46</sup> The image of a London in decline inspired J.A. Froude's advice to the white settler colonies that their societies would flourish best through a rejection of urban life. For Froude, the best hope for the British race lay in a regeneration of urban man away from the constraints of city life in the challenging and invigorating environment of the Australian bush or the 'back-blocks' of New Zealand. Froude believed this would revive the fortunes of the race, imperilled 'in the enormously extended suburbs of London and our great manufacturing cities: miles upon miles of squalid lanes, each house the duplicate of its neighbour.'<sup>47</sup> These themes were portable to parts of the empire where

'new Londons' arose. When writers in the Australian colonies imagined their new-world cityscapes, and the possible destruction of their own cities, due to greed, over-expansion or conquest, they often saw future catastrophes in terms of the precedent provided by London.<sup>48</sup> Much popular fiction betrayed a strong interest in the themes provided by imperial London. Many popular novels traded in the threat posed by returned adventurers, retired colonels with an arsenal acquired from days spent on the North-West frontier or dangerous colonial types, plotting colonial independence, revolt or international drug deals. Such stereotypes abound in post-war crime fiction, typified by the writings of Agatha Christie, against a background of Britain's diminishing role in the wider world.<sup>49</sup> Here rapid political change in the empire matched accelerated social change at home, providing fertile territory for the authors of popular fiction.<sup>50</sup> For Neville Shute, writing in the coronation year of 1953, about a projected British future in the 1980s, post-war emigration policy has emptied the country and Britain and London are in terminal decline. The best have emigrated to Australia and New Zealand, leaving a dwindling and listless population without enterprise, still facing food shortages, and in thrall to a statist socialist and quasi-republican government.

He came to the National Gallery on the north side of Trafalgar Square and crossed the road and stood for a time looking out over the square at the corner by Canada House. There was a bus stop near him, and a long queue of white-faced, patient Londoners waiting to go home. He thought of the vigour and beauty of the people in similar bus queues in Brisbane and Adelaide, comparing the tanned skins with the sallow, the upright carriage with the tired slouch. It wasn't the fault of these people that they looked white and tired; hardships had made them so, and overwork, and the errors of dietary scientists who planned the rationing back in the Forties and the Fifties, when most of them were children. Badly treated people, out of luck, yet with a quality of greatness in them still, in spite of everything.<sup>51</sup>

When the queen leaves London to reside permanently in the Australian commonwealth, the act provides final confirmation of Britain's impotent status and the rejection of her history and traditions. These sentiments extend Froude's vision of a declining London into the twentieth century and followed Macaulay's vision of metropolitan energies flowing outwards to the peripheries.

#### IV

Much of the popular fiction that deals with the destruction or collapse of London provides a counter-narrative to the utopian literature of social visionaries like

William Morris. In *News from Nowhere*, the upheaval and social collapse accompanying a revolution that begins in London gives way to a verdant rustic utopia in which an artisanal culture of individual creativity and communal values flourishes. The novel gained wide currency on the political left, inspiring a new generation of socialists and creating a usable political narrative in which riot and disorder initiated by a massacre of reformers in Trafalgar Square paved the way for a better world.<sup>52</sup> The London rebuilt by the revolutionaries in *News from Nowhere* is a verdant garden city, in which peach trees bloom in Trafalgar Square and the destruction of the slums of the East End is marked annually by a festival of country-dancing and rural recreations.<sup>53</sup> Many of the popular accounts of a capital spiralling into chaos and disorder were written in opposition to Morris' vision of a violent, but ultimately successful, transition into a peaceful and prosperous future. Most popular fiction authors posited instead a country plunged into a future of anarchy, social disorder and political chaos by irreconcilable radical and socialist elements. The fate of Paris during the Commune of 1871 provided a possible model for the potential destruction of London in these events, much commented on by the press and contemporary popular fiction writers. As Matthew Beaumont demonstrates, the Paris Commune, which provides a counterpoint to events in *News from Nowhere*, casts a long shadow across the fiction writing of the period.<sup>54</sup> James Harvey writing in *The Republican* newspaper in 1871 quoted the apocalyptic visions of Carlyle on the contagion of French revolutionary sentiment and its threat to the British government and the loyalty of the army:

These, these men may for a time may be true; once, twice – nay, a third time, they may mow down their brothers, friends and companions with musketry, but not always. Thomas Carlyle points to the helmeted giant posted at the Horse Guards, and prophecies that, regularly as he is to be seen in his sentry box, so long things may hold together, but his co-mate at the Tuileries has disappeared. And how long will he be seen in London?<sup>55</sup>

The events of the Commune, and the forces contemporaries believed it released, which Goldwin Smith described as 'political Satanism', were seen as an overt threat that thrived in London's slum districts.<sup>56</sup> As Beaumont remarks, in the nineteenth-century, any intimation of social breakdown or governmental collapse carried automatic connotations of the Commune. In the Victorian environmental thriller by William Delisle Hay, *The Doom of the Great City* (1880), in which a poisonous fog asphyxiates Londoners, a vacuum in authority gives rise to the killing of policemen, rampaging mobs, looting, and genocide.<sup>57</sup> Such images of a disintegrating London dominated by radicals, and *in extremis* throwing up forces of social disintegration and decay that hastened its decline, lingered into the twentieth century. In John Christopher's 1956 environmental



thriller, *The Death of Grass*, in which famine leads to a collapse of urban society, a small group of survivors listen to events in London on a car radio. With food stocks exhausted and the government in disarray, London has been taken over by a Citizens' Emergency Committee: 'The voice began suddenly and, with both radios now on, seemed very loud. The accent was quite unlike what might be expected on the BBC – a lightly veneered Cockney. The voice was angry and scared at the same time'. Roger, the cynic of the group sneers: 'At my guess the Emergency committee's a Triumverate, and composed of a professional anarchist, a parson, and a left-wing female schoolteacher. It would take that kind of combination to show such an ignorance of elementary human behaviour'.<sup>58</sup>

The fact that so much of this fiction trades in plots that show the consequences of a vacuum in authority, and, thereafter, either a restoration of order, or a dystopic alternative future, raises questions about the political orientation of the form. Much of this literature resists categorization. In conventional terms, however, the usage 'conservative' is sometimes employed to describe it. George Orwell detected a counter-revolutionary tone in much of it. Writing about the anti-socialist polemical fictions of Ernest Bramah, he remarked: 'Ernest Bramah . . . was a sensitive, idealistic man whose private fears of the mob turned him into a passionate anti-democrat'.<sup>59</sup> Eric Ambler echoed this view, writing his left-wing thrillers in conscious rebellion against a form that promoted an established kind of fiction, lacking in both characterization and plot, in which the hero 'could be a tweedy fellow with steel-grey eyes and gun pads on both shoulders or a moneyed dandy with a taste for adventure. He could also be a xenophobic ex-officer with a nasty anti-semitic streak. None of that really mattered. All he really needed to function as hero was abysmal stupidity combined with superhuman resourcefulness and unbreakable knuckle bones'.<sup>60</sup> As Ambler suggests, the protagonists in fiction by Haggard, Buchan and Kipling were frequently 'batchelor gentlemen', opposed to the 'new woman', scornful of the working classes and patrician in their protection of Britain's rural landscape against influences from the encroaching towns.<sup>61</sup> Alison Light has demonstrated that the inter-war period is a formative one for such literature, in which notions of particular styles in popular reading became strongly established. As she points out, this fiction was only seldom about country houses, 'old maids' and retired majors. In her study of the novels of inter-war women writers, she suggests it was often a static form in which there is an emphasis on rural respectability, and in which the rootless, downwardly mobile aristocracy and the 'feckless' and 'adenoidal' working class or domestic servants are distrusted alike. For her, popular fiction turns inwards towards the insular English and the domestic environment in these years.<sup>62</sup> More often than not, in the crime fiction of many inter-war authors, popular

fiction is traditionally characterized by the inability of its authors to clothe their work in the outward garb of respectability. In its nineteenth-century origins, much popular fiction was ephemeral and marginal. This notion harmonizes with Clive Bloom's definition of 'pulp' as 'always illicit, rarely controllable, maybe actually illegal, but only sometimes subversive'.<sup>63</sup> The popular thriller form in fact constitutes a fusion of genres and styles, in which particular styles of politics (socialism, trades unionism, pacifism, etc.) are seldom tolerated, and in which the keynote might be described as 'populist' in tone. Indeed, the essential components of this fiction follow the definitions of populism outlined by Ernesto Laclau in his *On Populist Reason*. Mainstream, yet excluded from the respectable, held in contempt, raucous in its approach, this fiction is informed by a conspiratorial mindset, in which a fragile Britain is constantly under threat and repeatedly imperilled by unreliably led unpatriotic elites and politically compromised governments. True virtue resides in 'the people', 'the little man' and the stoical middles in alliance with patrician figures who stand outside the structures of power and authority and who foil the plots of foreigners, the unpatriotic and the cosmopolitan. Only through the role of these elements can the nation itself be redeemed.<sup>64</sup>

At the heart of such fiction resides the vision of the capital. London's pre-eminence in such writing demonstrates the centrality of the metropolis in the national imagination. London is home to many of the symbols of nationhood and Britishness, from Buckingham Palace, through the National Portrait Gallery to the Bank of England. London as a backdrop to national calamity provides a short-hand for state, nation and government in crisis. References to London in much of the literature discussed here mirrored the city's place in national history and were reflective of its fortitude in World War II. Such images were consonant with London's resilience and survival during the German Blitz of London in 1940. Then totemic buildings like St. Paul's Cathedral that expressed English creativity and notions of national and historical continuity floated unscathed above the destruction to achieve a lasting place in the national imagination.<sup>65</sup> Community values, a steadfast determination to carry on and a smiling indifference to danger were the characteristics of a besieged, war-time London that worked their way through into the popular image of the city under attack.<sup>66</sup> They are routinely revived whenever Londoners experience difficulties or crisis. A London imperilled or actually fallen carried with it connotations of national defeat and humiliation. For many fiction writers, the state of the nation could be mirrored by events in London. From Eric Ambler's vision of London as a nest of conspiratorial city financiers in the 1930s (reflected in recent reporting of the 'credit crunch') through Wyndham Lewis's description of the carcass of the capital as a free city, rotting under the weight of bureaucratized socialist rule 'reeking in their nostrils of freedom' in

the late 1940s, London is a cipher, acting as a barometer of the position of the country.<sup>67</sup> In most depictions of dystopic events, it is this space that London occupies within popular fiction, and one reason why any discussion of pulp literature must involve a discussion of the capital. Unapologetically, therefore, London, as a place of disorder, governmental collapse, destruction or renewal, is at the heart of what follows.

It should be emphasized that this book offers only a limited contribution to the currently popular form of 'alternative' or 'counterfactual' history. Often concerned with military history, the actions of 'great men', international diplomacy and great power rivalry, 'alternative' history displays some of the 'populist' tendencies of imagined popular fiction.<sup>68</sup> Niall Ferguson, in the introduction to his 1997 *Virtual History* collection, acknowledges the presence of counterfactual history as a component of popular literature, but dismisses works like Robert Harris' *Fatherland* and the German victory in World War II he describes, as a mere 'extrapolation' of past trends, explored in insufficient depth, in which 'a Nazi victory in the Second World War becomes merely a titillating backdrop for a good departure-lounge yarn'.<sup>69</sup> In these comments, he shows the desire of historians working even in the field of 'speculative' history to distance themselves from the excesses of the popular fiction market. Whilst most of the novels under discussion here offer alternative or 'virtual' versions of British political development, rather than analysing the likelihood of the competing historical scenarios invoked, this book seeks to understand the context and background to the 'departures' in historical events outlined.

## V

This book is organized into the following chapters.

Chapter 1 provides the 'deep context' for fears about popular revolt in the capital and their implications for national stability. Drawing heavily on Pierce Egan Jr.'s *Wat Tyler* (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1841) and James Cooke's *Jack Cade, the Insurrectionist* (London: T. White, 1841), this chapter considers the historical precedents for attacks on London. The first real concerns about radical attempts to subvert London solidified around the Jacobin and Chartist movements of the early to mid-nineteenth century. Radicals themselves paid homage to Wat Tyler and evoked his march on London in 1381 as a possible blueprint for action against the government in the metropolis. Pierce Egan's popular novel about Wat Tyler's life captured the imagination of many radicals and was part of a radical cult surrounding Tyler's political memory that persisted through the early socialist movement into the traditions and popular memories of the Labour Party. This chapter considers the

fears of a revived peasant revolt generated by such revolutionary visions and describes the importance of Pierce Egan's conception of a tumultuous and ungovernable London, both to radicals and to the opponents of reformism. Furthermore, it analyses subsequent depictions of the events of 1381 by those writers who, from a conservative perspective, saw Tyler worship as a phenomenon that bred dangerous radical notions, in particular, the children's author, G. A. Henty, in his *A March on London* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897). Chapter 2 continues the theme of radical disruption of London and the concerns about national safety and collapse raised by radical insurgency. These manifested themselves particularly in the apparent threat posed by anarchist conspiracies in the later nineteenth century. The anarchist panics of the 1880s and 1890s coincided with the emergence of a more recognizably modern pulp fiction style and of new technologies for the construction of explosive devices. The origins of recent thriller-writing about bomb plots in London are here. Authors like E. Douglas Fawcett in *Hartmann the Anarchist* (New York, Arno Press: 1975), Richard Whiteing in *No. 5 John Street* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1902) and Edgar Wallace in *The Council of Justice* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1973) were prepared to imagine the consequences of a successful terrorist bomb plot in London. Their concern to identify possible terrorist communities or suspects painted a lurid vision of a dark and dangerous London that harboured deviant communities and individuals prepared to target central government in its home. Such fiction overlapped with similar work on the continent and drew inspiration from the new detective and spy fiction genres. In turn, it contributed to the creation of a new 'literature of terror' that has implications for later 'Red Scares' in the inter-war period.

Post-1919, the strongest fears manifested by thriller and detective fiction writers clustered around the Bolshevik menace. Indeed the merciless and fanatical Bolshevik agent rapidly assumed a central role in all subsequent thriller writing up until the 1950s. Between 1920 and the mid-1930s, this figure dominated concerns about possible insurgency in London. Communist writers like John Sommerfield in *May Day* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1984) imagined the circumstances in which a popular uprising might become possible in the capital; in return conservative thriller writers shuddered at the possible implications of revolution in the metropolis and urged preparations against its apparent inevitability. John Buchan's Richard Hannay and Sapper's Bulldog Drummond clashed directly with circles of Communist agents, often against the backdrop of conspiratorial activity in London. Less well-known novels like Dennis Wheatley's *Black August* (London: Arrow Books Ltd., 1961), or Hugh Addison's *The Battle of London* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd., 1926) described the steady descent of the post-revolutionary metropolis into chaos and disorder, and warned against the secret forces, both inside and outside