

Professor Knight's Crowner John

I suppose it was Brother Cadfael who started it all. The last decade has seen the emergence on the mass paperback market of the historical murder mystery, with settings ranging from Eighteenth Dynasty Egypt to Victorian times, and in quantities which relegate the more traditional historical novels, whether serious attempts to portray events as they were, costume drama, Mills & Boon set in days of yore, or bodice ripper, to the position of also-rans. Professor David Starkey commented recently on the apparent paradox that as the value accorded to the subject under the National Curriculum in English schools continues to decline, so the popular appetite for history increases. Certainly as society becomes more fluid, and people more mobile, so that attachment to a particular geographical locality and social group weakens, so the basic human need to 'belong', for individuals to know where they fit in to the world around them, seems more and more to express itself through genealogy and a desire to find out where one's ancestors fitted in. Perhaps the emergence of the historical murder mystery as a major fictional genre is one aspect of this. At any rate, it capitalises most felicitously on the current interest in history and that other obsession of modern times – crime, the more gruesome the better.

Given that professional police forces now exist worldwide, the writer of modern murder mysteries – that is, mysteries with a contemporary setting – is relieved of one difficulty which bedevils those who prefer a historical context: that is, how they create convincing reasons for their sleuths to be investigating murders in the first place. Admittedly, modern writers do face difficulties in this sphere; P.D. James made the mistake of promoting Adam Dalgleish to high rank very early in his career, so that before long he was too senior to be actively involved in detection, and had to be left, rather implausibly, to stumble over several corpses while on holiday or convalescing from illness. But for historical writers the problem is acute, and some deal with it more realistically than others. Lindsey Davies is most successful in projecting one modern genre back 2,000 years, and has Marcus Didius Falco earn a precarious living as a private investigator, given commissions by a variety of clients, and intermittently entrusted with discreet missions by the Emperor Vespasian and his household. Michael Jecks's early fourteenth century duo of Sir Baldwin de Furnhill and Simon Puttock have official responsibilities for dealing with crime as a keeper of the king's peace and bailiff to the Warden of the Stannaries respectively.

The typical historical detective is, however, an amateur who, having made a success of finding the killer of a corpse he comes upon by chance, becomes the person those around turn to whenever more corpses appear. Necessarily, a suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader is required – just how many murders can take place in the vicinity of Shrewsbury Abbey, even during the strife of Stephen's reign, and how

realistic is it for Kate Sedley to have Roger Chapman keep finding himself among murderers or their victims in his admittedly wide roamings as a travelling pedlar? By contrast, Bernard Knight has found the ideal solution.

Though there are scattered mentions of coroners in pre-Conquest documents, the office as it is known today originated in September 1194, when Richard I, during his brief sojourn in his kingdom after returning from his imprisonment in Germany, ordered that three knights should be appointed in each county to the office of 'Keeper of the Pleas of the Crown' (*custos placitorum coronas*), mainly, it would seem, to ensure that the profits of justice due to the Crown actually reached the Crown, rather than being milked by corrupt officials along the way. These early coroners were made responsible for ensuring that all serious crimes – the pleas of the Crown, defined as such under Cnut's Laws of 1016-35, and including murder and other homicides, arson, attacks on houses, robbery, rape, false coining and certain offences directly touching the dignity of the Crown – were dealt with by the royal courts rather than by the jumble of other courts which existed side by side with them. In order to do so, a coroner was required to investigate all sudden or unnatural deaths, holding inquests at which juries of sworn men would rule on the cause of death, to ensure that those accused of homicide were available to be brought to trial when the itinerant royal justices reached the county – months if not years later – and that all relevant matters were fully recorded for the benefit of the justices. The coroner's other responsibilities included ensuring that the king received what was due to him under his feudal prerogatives, such as his entitlement to treasure trove, to wrecks, and to whales and other 'great fish' washed up on the English coast. What more perfect occupation for a twelfth century detective?

Sir John de Wolfe, sometime companion in arms to Richard I and recently returned from crusade, is appointed a coroner in Devon in the first batch of creations, and is immediately hard at work, not least because he soon finds himself the sole coroner in one of the largest counties in England – only one other knight is prepared to accept the office, and he almost at once dies as the result of a fall from a horse. Indeed, murder is so frequent in Devon that the six books already published cover a span of only eighteen months.

Although I enjoyed the early Brother Cadfael books, I gave up on the series after half-a-dozen or so, largely because the picture they painted of medieval life was just too sanitised. The corpses were tidy, the weather was always good, with no more than the occasional shower to wet the dust. Even the acres of mud which must have been the norm for any twelfth century settlement for much of the year did not exist. The zenith of unreality was reached (in, I think, *Brother Cadfael's Penance*) when a prisoner managed to maintain a twentieth century standard of hygiene while chained to the wall of a dungeon. By contrast, in Bernard Knight's Devon there is mud a-plenty, and I'm not sure I would care to spend much time in Crowner John's company, as he

shaves only once a week, at which point he also pours a bucket of water over himself and changes his clothes. More often than not it is raining, the food and ale is at best variable in quality, and the general discomfort of medieval life is made clear. Even the Bush Inn, which is, we are assured, the finest hostelry in Exeter, is a distinctly basic establishment by modern standards; sleeping accommodation comprises cubicles with straw on the floor (clean straw admittedly, but mattresses are extra).

Reading the books, I have a slight but definite sense that the author's tongue is in his cheek at times, and he is not averse to poking a little fun at the conventions of the genre. Every fictional detective must have an assistant, or at any rate a Dr Watson to whom he can explain just what is going on. Sir John has two, and the trio form a capable but distinctly ill-assorted combination – the author admits that he deliberately made the three as unlike one another as possible, and clearly he enjoys having the assistants engage in constant bickering. Gwyn of Polruan is a large and rough-and-ready Cornishman who has accompanied Sir John on many campaigns, and, like his master, enjoys nothing better than a good fight. Thomas de Payne is a priest unfrocked for an alleged rape, of fastidious habits and unprepossessing appearance (he has a limp and a slight hunchback as a result of childhood tuberculosis), and has acquired his post as the coroner's clerk through the good offices of his uncle, a canon of Exeter Cathedral. Given that the coroner's role involves the keeping of accurate records for the benefit of the royal justices, Sir John is fortunate indeed that Thomas is an educated man. However, the dearest wish of Thomas himself is to return to holy orders, an ambition quite beyond the ken of Gwyn, who, along with John, cannot understand how so unmanly a fellow – he even chooses to ride side-saddle – could have put himself in a position to be accused of rape in the first place. Sir John himself, modelled on a now-deceased QC of the author's acquaintance, is tall, gaunt, stooping, and sternly incorruptible, with an intimidating manner that conceals a kind heart that he shows on all too rare occasions, and never to his wife.

Most fictional sleuths have contented domestic lives, in the form either of happy marriages (Furnhill and Puttock, and Candace Robb's Owen Archer) or fulfilling religious vocations (Brother Cadfael and Peter Tremayne's Sister Fidelma). Sir John de Wolfe has neither. Instead he has Matilda, to whom he was unwillingly married many years ago, and has been trying to stay away from ever since. Initially, Matilda saw social advantage in her husband's becoming coroner, but ever since she has done nothing but complain at the amount of time he devotes to his duties. (Since they do little but argue when they are under the same roof, one wonders why she cares so much.) Matilda's brother, Richard de Revelle, happens to be the sheriff, so an extra element is added to the inevitable demarcation disputes between the holders of the two offices as the new system beds down. Not only do the two detest one another on a personal level, the sheriff has a strong financial incentive to ensure that crime continues to be dealt with by the shire and borough courts under his control, rather than be diverted to the royal courts. That is not all, since he is also Sir John's political

enemy, being a supporter of the King's younger brother, John, recently in rebellion during Richard's imprisonment. Naturally there are frequent clashes between coroner and sheriff, made worse by Matilda's tendency to take her brother's part in every quarrel.

Sir John has consolation in the form of Nesta, the widowed landlady of the Bush Inn, with whom and in her bed he spends as much time as his duties will permit. However, by Book Five, *The Tinner's Corpse*, Nesta too is complaining that he is more interested in dead bodies than he is in her, and we are left to wonder whether the pair will make it up in the next volume, or whether Sir John will seek to spend more time with Hilda, wife of Thorgils the boatman.

Bernard Knight is impressively qualified to write mysteries, having been a Home Office pathologist from 1965 to 1996, latterly Professor of Forensic Pathology at the University of Wales College of Medicine, and responsible for the forensic work in the Frederick and Rosemary West murders. He was initially drawn to the twelfth century through his interest in Welsh history, that being the period of the Norman incursions into South Wales and the Welsh reaction against them. In the 1970s he wrote two novels about semi-legendary heroes of medieval Wales, the first based on the story of Owain and Princess Nest, the most famous historical romance in Welsh, the second on Madoc, the Welsh prince who supposedly crossed the Atlantic three centuries before Columbus, to land at Mobile, Alabama, in 1170. A mystery series featuring a coroner as hero required, however, an English setting, since the office of coroner did not exist in Wales until very much later, perhaps not until the sixteenth century. Devon, Professor Knight admits, was a slightly arbitrary choice. He needed a maritime county, so as to make use of the coroner's jurisdiction over wrecks and great fish, and Devon was a place he liked visiting.

Reading the first two Crouner John books, I did wonder whether Professor Knight had allowed his expertise in forensics to run away with him in a couple of places, but lately it seems that he has found the right balance. There is no danger here of overtidy corpses. Though their fatal injuries are not necessarily as gruesome as all that, by the time the corpses come to be inspected by the coroner and his team there is plenty to turn the stomach. They stink, they have their eyes pecked out by sea birds, and have turned strange colours as the result of decomposition. The author's profession demands thoroughness, and attention to small details, and Professor Knight has done his research carefully. He acknowledges the help of a Professor of Legal History in establishing not only the powers of the first coroners but also their place in a highly complex legal system, which had developed haphazardly and had numerous and overlapping jurisdictions. Generally this research is not intrusive, though it emerges with more force than usual in *The Tinner's Corpse*, when a second coroner is appointed through the machinations of the Sheriff de Revelle, and Sir John demands of him whether he is actually going to perform the full duties of the office, to wit.....

However, one reason for reading a historical novel is to learn something about another era, so the expositions on twelfth century tin mining necessary on this occasion for the plot are not out of place. Professor Knight has also been painstaking in his research about the geography of twelfth century Exeter, and the ‘feel’ of a medieval town is strong. The cathedral is only half-built, as is the bridge across the Exe, whose construction has been suspended because the city burgesses cannot afford to pay the builder. The cathedral close is full of workmen and their rubble, the streets are narrow and muddy, and the books consider everyday practical issues such as planning journeys so as to reach the city gates before they close at sunset. The reader also gets a much greater sense of the aggression and violence lurking close to the surface of medieval life – knights in the Crowner John books don’t just argue and complain of slights against their honour, they pull out swords and have to be physically prevented from running one another through on the spot!

What of *The Tinner’s Corpse*, the fifth in the series, which recently came out in paperback? The eponymous corpse makes its appearance in the Prologue, but its discovery and consequent investigation form only the beginning of a tale which embraces two struggles for power, one for control over the Dartmoor tin industry itself, the other around local tin magnate Walter Knapman, who becomes the second subject of a coroner’s investigation when his body is pulled out of the River Teign. Meanwhile, Crowner John’s relationship with Nesta hits a sticky patch, and Thomas de Payne sinks into the depths of despair when his hopes of an early restoration to holy orders are dashed. I won’t give away the whole plot, but readers already acquainted with the series can expect a good deal of arguing, a riot, innocent men being consigned to noisome gaols, including the trusty Gwyn after he is accused of murder in the course of putting down the riot, and a final fight before the mystery is more-or-less solved. Having enjoyed the first three in the series, I found the fourth, *The Awful Secret*, disappointing and unconvincing. *The Tinner’s Corpse* works much better for me, though I have to admit that the lawyers were just a little too modern. I am one myself, and we are frequently accused of being an old-fashioned profession, but I do think that some things have changed over 800 years, and Professor Knight does not have quite the aplomb in dealing with anachronism that Lindsey Davies displays.

In the sixth volume, *The Grim Reaper*, which has just appeared, the people of Exeter have a serial killer in their midst, one, moreover, who can only be in holy orders, since he leaves a carefully selected and apposite biblical text with each corpse. The relationship between secular and spiritual authority is difficult in any event – will Bishop Henry Marshal, making one of his rare visits to his episcopal seat, allow his clergy to assist Crowner John’s investigation, or allow the killer to take refuge in benefit of clergy and continue his increasingly frequent killings? Soon Thomas de Payne, as an educated man with a better knowledge of the Bible than most of the parish clergy, is under suspicion. To make matters worse, the killer is still at large when the king’s justices arrive for the long-delayed General Eyre, and Richard de

Revelle seeks to use this in his continuing war with Crowner John. Again, I won't give away too much, but fans of the series will not be disappointed.

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