

***Fifty Years in the Fiction Factory: The Working Life of Herbert Allingham* by Julia Jones (Chelmsford: Golden Duck; £17.99). 978-1-899262-07-6. xii + 386 pp.**

Margery Allingham's parents made an oddly assorted couple, for all that they were cousins and perpetuated what had become the family tradition, as Grub Street hacks. Or more accurately, as Julia Jones points out, craft workers. Emily Jane was the more picturesque character, but Herbert, as Ms Jones has discovered, was the more profound – and probably the more interesting. When he died in 1936, Margery gathered all his manuscripts, letters and other papers and stored them in the attic at D'Arcy House. Much later, her sister Joyce suggested to Julia Jones that some of the stories might bear republishing, and although nothing came immediately of that idea towards the end of her life Joyce gave all the papers to Julia. And the eventual result was *Fifty Years in the Fiction Factory*.

The literary stratum in which Herbert Allingham and others of his family worked still exists in *People's Friend*, though it has pretty much died out elsewhere. (The new phenomenon of internet publication, making vast amounts of fiction and non-fiction accessible to all, is something different and much less consistent.) Allingham's stories rarely appeared under his own name. In the pages of *The Christian Globe*, *Oracle*, *Bullseye*, *The Butterfly*, *Merry and Bright*, and many other periodicals he was Herbert St Clair, Tess Allan-Wood, Victoria Strong... and (in a tradition still active in my own childhood) for *Film Fun* he wrote as Larry Semon, Houdini, Fatty Arbuckle and even Norma Talmadge. Much of the time his work was uncredited, except, perhaps, to "a famous author" or "the author of ...". Unlike his contemporary Charles Hamilton, who became famous as Frank Richards, creator of Greyfriars School, Herbert Allingham himself had no identity as far as the many thousands who read his stories were concerned.

He wrote at least ninety-eight novel-length serials, plus numerous short stories and any amount of editorial and advertising matter. Many were republished under different titles, sometimes but not always reworked, but none ever appeared in book form – and that, to him, meant that he was never a real author. He was better read and more literate than many of today's best-selling writers, and despite the constraints of finance and class he achieved a good degree at Cambridge as a non-collegiate student (in Modern History, not, as his daughters believed, Theology). He was immensely versatile as a writer, and seems never to have been cynical, however frustrated he must have felt by low pay and often unreasonable editorial demands. His character Will Holt, known as "the Duffer", introduced in a school story in 1904, can stand beside the boys of the Greyfriars Remove, and may well have influenced his daughter's creation of Albert Campion. His output encompassed comedy, melodrama, thrilling adventure, and even social realism. His successors, I'd suggest, may be writing for *Coronation Street* and *East Enders*. Or they are, like Terry Nation, Richard Harris and Dennis Spooner, writers who seem to be able to work in almost any genre. Herbert Allingham's talent was different from Margery's both in degree and in kind. He taught her the practicalities of writing, and she famously called herself his "industrious apprentice", but it seems to have taken him some time to realise that his way and hers were not the same.

Thanks to Julia Jones, we can know the man in a way that his own readers never could. The periodicals that gave them such innocent and cheap pleasure (and were sneered at and castigated by George Orwell) created a mythology, a fictional version, both reassuring and exciting, of the magazines, their staff and their relationship with their readers. Reality would have been out of place there, but it's here in this book, and it is fascinating.

Roger Johnson for the *Bottle Street Gazette* (Journal of the Margery Allingham Society)