

*'A Curiously Sane Girl'*  
*Introduction to the First Edition*

When Margery Allingham died in 1966 she left a husband a household and some thirty published volumes. The amount most people knew about her could have fitted neatly onto the back cover of one of them. A 'Margery Allingham' had a flavour of its own and a place in popular esteem; the character, Margery Allingham, was more elusive.

It has become accepted form to refer to Margery with Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers and Ngaio Marsh as 'Golden Age' 'Queens of Crime' and then express surprise that they were all 'very private' people. A visiting friend once said to Margery, 'My dear Marge though you write crime novels you do have a dainty drawing room!' 'What did she expect?' wrote Margery, 'Did she think I would keep a corpse under the sofa?'

In her lifetime Margery had seen her books, such very English books, widely translated and sold throughout the world. She sometimes wondered what readers in Japan or Iron Curtain Czechoslovakia made of her Adventures. She knew they were enjoyed in America, Canada, New Zealand, Italy, Portugal, Scandinavia and Germany. One of the earliest letters she received from a fan was written in 1943 from a prisoner-of-war camp and addressed not to her but to her detective, Albert Campion, at his fictional home, 17A Bottle Street.

Margery had written her first thrillers with their silly ass hero to amuse a smart group of youngsters of her own age. She had no idea that then that either her work or the mystery novel would prove so durable. When, more than thirty years later, she found those same early novels were being read by a whole new generation, she suggested that the genre, the 'box' in which she had spent almost all of her professional life, had become part of the century's folk literature. Adventure and detective stories might be compared to the morality plays performed in the market places of the fifteen century. Both, in Margery's view, 'stated an elementary theory of Right or Wrong, Growing or Dying in a cheerful, popular way.'

Appreciations of Margery as a popular novelist, specifically as a practitioner of detective fiction have produced a small but fascinating shelf-load. On the shelf stand contributions from experts and collectors, from historians of popular culture and from scholars who have concentrated on the technical aspects of her work - such as narrative structure of reader response. Margery was proud of her status and would have found the discussions of her work by fellow detective novelists of particular interest. There has already been a biographical study which in tandem with the detail of her life seeks to provide 'a serious critical study' of her writing.

Margery herself made a distinction between books written to entertain or instruct the reader and books written out of the author's need. The best novels in any sphere, she believed, were conceived for the second reason but in their execution succeeded in fulfilling the aims of the first. Margery chose to write a certain kind of fiction but her Campion novels were not written to a formula. Although she was shrewd and knowledgeable about technical matters, she saw herself first and foremost as 'an instinctive writer whose intellect trots along behind, tidying and censuring and saying "Oh My!" She wrote 'as I have to' and because she had to. The mystery novel genre provided a camouflage beneath which she could escape. Not escape in any facile or non-realistic sense but seek escape from perceptions that were pressing on her, experiences which troubled or her hurt her. She could distance these things by putting them into a story thus giving them a new form of their own. 'The whole of life is

about escape,' she once said in an interview. 'As long as you face every problem that's presented to you it's not wrong to escape a little. After all you only escape from insanity into sanity and that must be a very good thing.'

I did not come to Margery's life and work through a special knowledge of the detective novel. I had read most of her books quite indiscriminately among a mass of other fiction. Very often I read them again for the sheer pleasure of their style and the indefinable impression of being welcomed into someone else's world. They were also good stories. The book which alerted me to the personality of my hostess, and the matters from which she might be seeking relief, was one which had slipped from popular view, Margery's World War II testament, *The Oaken Heart*. This was a commissioned book written with a propaganda purpose. It was at the same time a book which helped its author put a frightening time into perspective. When I read it I found many things explained, not only about Margery but about some attitudes of a generation that was not my own.

*The Oaken Heart* is an allusive and somewhat obscure book which leaves as many questions raised as answered. Reading it was like hearing one side only of a conversation. 'In the course of a very happy if strenuous life,' wrote Margery, 'I have had many mental and moral adventures. As *The Oaken Heart* is a book written for those who stayed at home I couldn't quite see what she meant. It sent me back to reread her novels in the order that she had written them and to try to discover more about her life.

Viewed as a single opus compiled over forty years, the Campion novels comment and develop aspects of each other; sometimes taking up matters of theme, sometimes problems of form. Within her detective box Margery did not play safe. She described herself as an experimental writer and, within these bounds, the description is valid. Her relationship with her chief character, Albert Campion, grew increasingly complex and intimate. 'Mr Campion has wandered through them all as, indeed, so have I,' she wrote towards the end of her life. 'As far as I am concerned one is just about as real as the other.' More and more insistently the action of her books demands interpretation on different levels. Her adventures were, as she said, 'mental and moral', and for that her material was all around her.

Margery had been brought up in the tradition of adventure fiction rather than of armchair detection. Robert Louis Stevenson had been a literary influence from her earliest years – but Stevenson had sailed the South Seas as well as tramped the city street. She was sometimes worried by the unadventurousness of her life as she settled into her Essex village and sought warm quiet corners of the house in which to write. 'I envy you, you know,' she wrote to her younger sister Joyce who was serving with the WRNS in Singapore in *The Oaken Heart* days, but she took comfort from the examples of other women writers such as Jane Austen, who lived parochially, or Elizabeth Barrett Browning, confined by her health to a sofa. Both of them, thought Margery, were adept at 'guessing correctly' about life. Perhaps, she added, 'they were not so remarkable in that they knew so few people, as in that they knew a few people very well indeed. It may well be, she concluded, 'that I am best where I am and that *any* people can teach me what I need to know.'

As I read Margery's books more thoroughly, their relationship to her life began to appear extraordinarily close. People simply stepped across. I found Margery's mother-in-law selling flowers outside a bank, her friend (Alan) Joe Gregory as a mid-Atlantic villain, herself as a part American painter, her husband as 'an old cad.' 'I should be dense indeed if I did not recognise some of your originals,' wrote her uncle Ted in 1935 and twenty years later, in 1955, her secretary Gloria noticed, with a lurch of

embarrassment her own work-roughened pair of hands picked up and made use of in the latest *Campion*.

There was more to this than everyday observation. Although Margery clearly enjoyed playing with real-life material in her fiction and brilliantly juggled her separate worlds, she also possessed a powerful, even turbulent, imagination. There were moments in her life when she was afraid that this might run out of control. Her notions of time and levels of reality were complicated and she sensed danger in a collision or confusion of her inner and outer worlds.

Nor were the limitations of her life entirely voluntary. Her poor health and increasing unwieldy body were a prison – to what extent only she knew. ‘I should be more mobile,’ she said once, ‘but so should grand pianos.’ Margery was a big personality with ambitions and emotions to match. In the confined sphere of domestic life there were inevitably occasions when she had to discover means by which to vent her feelings in secret.

She kept a diary. It is usually brief and by no means complete. Sometimes she started new years with diligence but her entries petered out by the spring. In other years it is virtually entire and it is tempting to assume that those were years in which the private record played an important part. That would, however, be extremely rash. In her diaries Margery reveals aspects of herself that passed unnoticed in her lifetime – her depression and insecurity above all. Joyce, Margery’s sister, allowed me complete freedom to read and make use of these diaries and to rummage unhindered through the mass of family material in Margery’s last writing room. She had been saddened, and to some extent shocked by what she had read and her generosity enabled me to glimpse the extent of the troubles Margery had been seeking to assuage.

If there could be a prize for the perfect literary legatee I would like to propose Joyce Allingham. Margery’s theories of inheritance were important to her but I have sometimes wondered whether she realised what burdens, as well as benefits, she was passing to her younger sister. Not least in the delicate matter of dealing with a biographer. Margery had been intensely protective of her reputation in her lifetime. She was convinced that the reading public liked a clear, comprehensible image of its authors – if it wanted an image at all. Usually she preferred her books to speak for her. She was anxious that her publishers and the people she dealt with professionally should not regard her as a difficult personality. This was partly her literary tradesman’s upbringing, partly her complicated lack of confidence. She welcomed the mystery story camouflage. ‘Nobody blamed the mystery writer for being no better than himself ... no one, not even in the literary columns, wrote to analyse his twisted ego or to sneer at his un-formed philosophy. Nobody cared what the mystery writer *thought* as long as he did his work and told his story.’ She destroyed some letters because she was afraid they might be misinterpreted or cause pain domestically. She did not anticipate that anyone would wish to write about her life apart from her work.

Time and again in letters to her publishers or interviews with journalists Margery makes the best of things. This was characteristic of her approach to life and was important to her. It would have been so easy for Joyce to consider that the brave face must be upheld after her death. But she did not take that view. When I asked her to read what I had written she was scrupulous in checking facts but did not ever seek to influence my opinions or my selection of material.

I hope, through this, that the brave face has been reaffirmed. Margery had to content with many problems within her personality and her circumstances. She possessed a power of insight into other people’s characters and motivations that was sometimes

hard to live with. But she kept on living with and liking them. Her cheerfulness was not false. Laughter was crucial if she was to keep a steady view of life. Depression was one aspect but gaiety was another and both aspects came together in her novels. By writing her bitter comedies she kept tragedy at bay. 'My bet is,' she said, 'that grave and gay people are born not made. One either finds life entertaining or one does not and what happens in one's life has remarkably little effect upon that basic outlook.'

'A curiously sane girl,' her father called her once. And that I think she was.

*Julia Jones (Thorogood) 1991*