

## JILLENE BYDDER

University of Waikato Library

### **Better than Biggles: Michael Annesley's 'Lawrie Fenton' spy thrillers.**

#### **ABSTRACT**

*Captain F.A.M. Webster, the athlete, athletics coach and author who lived from 1886 to 1949, wrote a series of fifteen spy thrillers under the pseudonym of Michael Annesley. His hero, Lawrie Fenton, is a lively and laid-back secret agent for the fictional Intelligence Branch of the (British) Foreign Office. The books were published between 1935 and 1950, and the series is important because of its European settings, analyses of contemporary politics, insights into contemporary points of view, and snapshots of events and places. Fenton was a new and exciting hero for his times. The paper establishes Webster's unrecognized but important influence on the development of the spy thriller. The photographs are from the Webster family collection.*

#### **KEYWORDS**

F.A.M. Webster  
Spy thrillers  
Michael  
Annesley  
Lawrie Fenton  
The Great Game

#### **MICHAEL ANNESLEY = F.A.M. WEBSTER**

Frederick Annesley Michael Webster was born on 27 June 1886. He was an athlete who started his long involvement with British athletics and the Olympic movement by reporting on the London Olympics in 1908. He originated the idea of the Amateur Field Events Association in 1910, was the English javelin throwing champion in 1911 and 1923 and began his writing career with a book called *Olympian Field Events: Their History and Practice* (Webster 1913). He was inducted into the England Athletics Hall of Fame in 2012. His methods of coaching and his advice on the care and training of athletes are still held in high regard (England Athletics 2012; Loughborough Sporting Club 2015).

He wrote numerous magazine articles and books on athletics, covering everything from jumping or hurdling to winter training, slimming exercises and keeping fit. His other writings ranged from three army manuals during the First World War to poetry and adventure and detective fiction for both adults and children. The British Library holds 97 of his published books.

His output was extraordinary: during the years 1935–1949, for instance, he edited the *Athlete* magazine, was the first Director of the Loughborough School of Athletics, Games and Physical Training and served in the Army during the Second World War. At the same time he continued to publish adventure stories, further books on athletics, *Our Great Public Schools* (Webster 1937), and a spy thriller called *East of Kashgar: A Secret Service Story* (Webster 1940).



Figure 1: F.A.M. Webster (right) coaching Stan Lay from New Zealand, Stamford Bridge, 1928.

In addition, and also between 1935 and 1949, he wrote fifteen 'Lawrie Fenton' spy thriller stories under the name of Michael Annesley. (Annesley 1935, 1936, 1937, 1938b, 1939, 1940a, 1940b, 1944a, 1944b, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1950).

### **SPY FICTION IN THE 1930s**

A number of books based on their authors' experiences as spies in the First World War were published in the early 1930s (Bydder 2008). Webster, writing as Annesley, contributed a story about the First World War to *My Best Spy Story*, a popular collection first published in 1938 (Annesley 1938a: 9-26), and he may have been inspired to write the Fenton series and his other spy stories by this sudden resurgence of interest in war and spy fiction.

There were other contemporary authors writing spy fiction of varying quality and interest. In 1935, the year in which the first Fenton story was published, Bernard Newman, another prolific author, published a thriller called *Spy* (Newman 1935) and John Buchan warned against communism in *The House of the Four Winds* (Buchan 1935). W. E. Johns, whose pilot hero Biggles featured in many formulaic adventure stories for young adults written between 1932 and 1968, brought back the threat of a Russian invasion in *Biggles and the Black Peril* (Johns 1935) and the popular writer H. C. McNeile ('Sapper') wrote about the dangers of disarmament and the British policies of appeasement towards Germany in *Bulldog Drummond at Bay* (McNeile 1935).

The Fenton stories were different. At this time the existence of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) was not public knowledge, but perhaps Webster was close to someone in the SIS, and it is possible that he reported back to the SIS after travelling abroad to athletics meetings. His creation of the fictional Intelligence Branch of the Foreign Office for the Fenton stories revealed the Foreign Office's oversight of the SIS: in the 1930s and 1940s the SIS budget was hidden under the Foreign Office Parliamentary vote (O'Halpen 1986). He was aware of the division of responsibilities between MI5 (the Security Service, responsible for security within the United Kingdom) and the SIS (later also known as MI6, responsible for gathering intelligence outside the United Kingdom). This is illustrated by the plot in *Spy-Counter Spy* (Annesley 1946) where Fenton is seconded to the Home Office (in other words MI5) to investigate a black market matter in England. He had other privileged information: he knew, for instance, about the Athénée Palace, the hotel used by spies in Bucharest, where Fenton stays in *Spies in Action* (Annesley 1937).

One of the delights of the Annesley books are comments which give his readers insider information such as 'the well-proven adage of the Secret Service, "Suspect everybody," warned him to move with care.' (Annesley 1939: 43) and 'in the Secret Service to be too obvious is to court probable disaster' (Annesley 1939: 148).

Webster's fictional agency was undoubtedly intended to represent the real SIS, as the subtitles of four of the first five stories in the series indicate, but it is clear in *Spy Corner* that Fenton is offered the job of Head of the Intelligence Branch of the Foreign Office (Annesley 1948: 187, 190). This allowed Fenton to deal with Nazi plots in England in *Spies Abounding* (Annesley 1945) and *Spy Corner* (Annesley 1945, 1948) and stopped Webster being prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act, as Compton Mackenzie had been for revealing

information about the Secret Service in *Greek Memories* (Mackenzie 1932; Andrew 1985: 351-352).

Rudyard Kipling first capitalized the initial letters of the phrase Great Game in *Kim*, (Kipling 1901), and the idea of spying as a game must have appealed to Webster the athlete. The Fenton stories continue the very English idea that spying is the greatest game of all. It is a lasting theme, from the first book, *Room 14: A Secret Service Story*, where 'The Great Game is one into which feelings and personalities do not enter' (Annesley 1935: 22), to the last, *Spy Island*, where "We're all in what we regard as the most modern and greatest game" (Annesley 1950: 23). The dedication in Webster's 1940 story *East of Kashgar* neatly equates spies serving their country in the 'Great Game' to serving officers in the Army.



Figure 2: F.A.M. Webster

## LAWRIE FENTON

Lawrie Fenton is English, fair-haired, elegant, and deceptively foolish-looking, but despite his appearance and his frivolous conversation he is a man of action. So far, he is just another conventional hero. But he is also lively, laidback and human and the books still seem fresh and modern despite their age.

Fenton seems familiar to us, and that is because he was the first of a new kind of spy thriller fiction hero. There are three important points of difference between Fenton and previous spy thriller heroes.

1. He belongs to an identifiable intelligence agency, and most importantly, normally operates in another country, not in his own, so is clearly an SIS, not a MI5, agent.
2. He is part of the long tradition of the 'man alone' in secret intelligence work, the ones who cannot be given any help if things go wrong, but who solve international crises on our behalf.
3. In most of the books he is a professional agent rather than an amateur. Spying at this time was still no job for a gentleman but it is clear in the first book that unlike other fictional heroes he has been given an official job by the British Foreign Office (Annesley 1935: 12) and that he himself employs agents (Annesley 1935: 66). In *Spies Abounding*, published ten years later, Fenton is 'the best agent in Sir George's employ' because 'He acted from the sheer love of adventure and not for the very modest remuneration which the conscience of the Foreign Office [...] obliged them to pay him' (Annesley 1945: 8). The implication is that he is a gentleman and probably has a private income, but he is nevertheless also a paid professional.

In *Room 14: A Secret Service Story*, Fenton is in Warsaw and prevents a war between Poland and Germany, and consequent European rearmament and a second European war (Annesley 1935). Webster links the danger of appeasement with the political decisions made after the First World War in Fenton's second adventure, *Spies in the Web: a Secret Service Story* (Annesley 1936). It shows the problems created by the disposition of territories after the First World War and describes the impact of the rise of National Socialism, the conflicts between Germans and Lithuanians and the hatred of Germans for the Jews. And in the last pre-war story, *The Vanished Vice-Consul*, Fenton needs a job and becomes the British Vice-Consul in the then-Polish town of Wilno (now Vilnius in Lithuania). Poland is described as a country of 'seething undercurrents' (Annesley 1939: 62) because of its frontier problems with Russia, Germany and Lithuania. 'Some powers would expect to benefit from trouble in this part of Europe' and indeed, the Russian (Communist) villain is attempting to start a conflict between Poland and Lithuania and 'explode the European powder magazine' (Annesley 1939: 62, 145).

The physical dangers in the Fenton stories are similar to the physical dangers faced by modern heroes. In 1935's *Room 14: A Secret Service Story* there is a fight in a sleazy underworld bar. 'Watching his chance, Fenton waded in. He fought his way up to the circle

of men who surrounded Schmidt and Stella, armed with a bottle which he had picked up off the floor.' (Annesley 1935: 5). He later escapes pursuing villains by sliding down a high bluff overlooking the Vistula River in Poland and letting the river carry him downstream (Annesley 1935: 90-91) and in 1939's *The Vanished Vice-Consul* 'Fenton's left foot, impelled with every ounce of his weight and strength and all his dislike, took Wilenski on the mouth and sent him spinning into the wall, whence he slid unconscious to the floor' (Annesley 1939: 167). In 1940, 'The side of Fenton's hand descended on the back of his neck [...] It was a lovely blow, but it did not kill the victim.' (Annesley 1940: 188). As he gets older Fenton can still fight when he needs to: he "hammered the man into a senseless mass and left his body lying the gutter' (Annesley 1946: 115).

### FENTON AND WOMEN

Fenton's views on women may not have been Webster's own, but they are part of the long tradition of the real SIS prejudice against employing women (Andrew 2010: 220-221; Smith 1996: 36-37). There is an intriguing parallel between the frequent comments about the dangers of employing women for Secret Service work in Compton Mackenzie's *Water on the Brain* (Mackenzie 1933) and similar comments in any work by Michael Annesley. Women are there to be used, and they are also untrustworthy: 'he was fully aware of her cleverness, and also that many men in the Secret Service had thrown away their lives because they had put their trust in women' (Annesley 1935: 119).

There is genuine sexiness and feeling in all Fenton's relationships and some extraordinarily passionate scenes between Fenton and Stella in *Room 14*.

'The front of her low-cut dress hung open, and Fenton could see the smooth valley between her breasts. She saw the direction of his glance, but she did not alter her position. Instead she smiled. Fenton discovered his lips were dry, and a pulse in his temple beat like a steam-hammer.' (Annesley 1935: 41-42).

There are strong women in some 1930s crime fiction, like Dorothy Sayers' Harriet Vane, but, unusually, Webster allows the female characters in his spy thrillers to be secret agents and to take risks. This is practical, especially during the Second World War. But even pre-war, Stella can operate independently and frequently saves Fenton's life, as she does in *The Vanished Vice-Consul* (Annesley 1939). Stella is killed in an air raid at the beginning of the war (Annesley 1944b; Annesley 1948: 178) and Alex, who becomes Fenton's second

wife at the end of *Spy Corner* (Annesley 1948), first appears in a wartime novel, *Spies Abounding*, as a character who has been working as a spy for England in Europe since before the War (Annesley 1945: 11, 41) and who has managed to escape by persuading ‘the Nazis to send me over here as one of their agents’ (Annesley 1945: 31).

Webster is also unusual in his understanding of lower class women like the prostitute Ninon in *Room 14* (Annesley 1935), and he is a revolutionary: Alex later becomes the unofficial co-Head of the Intelligence Branch of the Foreign Office (Annesley 1950: 8).

### FENTON AND WAR

Webster’s 1935 description of a Polish town after a German air attack is gruesomely realistic and disturbing, giving his readers a reminder of the horrors of the last war in the hope of preventing another one. ‘This must never happen again, Fenton. There must never be another war’[...] they had seen things that day which neither of them was ever likely to forget—the senseless and useless slaughter of their fellow-men.’ (Annesley 1935: 309-310).



Figure 3: Captain F.A.M. Webster, Adjutant, South Staffordshire Regiment, 1915

His books show genuine sympathy for those affected by war, both in its political results and its effects on innocent civilians, and his experiences in the First World War give his wartime Fenton stories like *An Agent Intervenes* (Annesley 1944a), set in occupied France, a mature depth.

The quality of thriller fiction written during the first two years of the war was particularly low (Hewison 1977: 37-52, 82- 83, 88-94, 174-175). The Annesley novels published during the Second World War are typical of the period (Harrison 1941: 433-435): like *Spies Abounding*, they deal with German spies in Britain, or like *Spy Against the Reich* are far-fetched stories about British agents operating on the continent. (Annesley 1945, 1940a).

However Webster's books always reflect current thinking: *Spies Abounding* has an another unlikely plot, but even then the novel is interesting because of its picture of London in wartime, its anti-German feeling, its analysis of the War's progress, for instance—'Germany cannot now win the war, even with the aid of Japan' (Annesley 1945: 29)—and its recognition of the problems of the working man in a time of war (Annesley 1945: 30).

### FENTON AND THE SOVIET UNION

Germany replaced the Soviet Union as the main target of British foreign intelligence in the mid-1930s (Andrew 1987: 22) but as always Webster continued to reflect wide-spread public concerns, like the visibility of émigré Russians and the possible threat from home-grown communists. *The Missing Agent: A Secret Service Story* features a pair of young Russians who escaped from the Bolsheviks. The girl unwittingly becomes an agent of the OGPU, the Soviet Secret Service. (Annesley 1938b). *Spies in Action* has Russians who are attempting to buy into the Rumanian oilfields, and who talk as if war is a certainty. "It will be the final struggle between Capitalism and Communism," replied Kanovitch.' (Annesley 1937: 192).

Germany invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. Without the tremendous Soviet war effort Great Britain would have lost the war: 'everyone knew that the Eastern Front was bleeding the Wehrmacht to death far more surely than any western theatre' (Beevor 1998: 405).

It is to his credit that Webster continued to use Russian characters in the Fenton series, and it is surprising how unusual this was in contemporary fiction even though most public opinion during the War was pro-Soviet (Calder 1969: 261-262). Catherine in *The Vanished Vice-Consul* is Russian (Annesley 1939: 44), as is Sonia in *Suicide Spies* (1944b), and Alex is half Russian in *Spies Abounding* (Annesley 1945: 117). *Suicide Spies* includes Fenton's interview with a gentlemanly Russian officer after his escape from an operation in Poland (Annesley 1944b).

After the War came the Cold War, and with it a change in British attitudes towards the Soviet Union. Fenton's wife Alex, half Russian during the war in *Spies Abounding* (Annesley 1945), is described as Polish by 1948 in *Spy Corner* (Annesley 1948). Webster mentions the possibility of an 'atomic war' in the same book (Annesley 1948: 123).

*Spy Corner* and *Spy Island* also tell us about other post-war problems (Annesley 1948, 1950). *Spy Corner* warns not only about 'British fascists and communists' (Annesley 1948: 182) but also about the emergence of a socialist state in England, saying that 'neither blood nor breeding counts according to the Socialist creed' (Annesley 1948: 82). It also comments on the financial problems of the middle classes (Annesley 1948: 31-32, 131).

By 1950 Britain's world influence was declining, but Cyprus was still a crown colony and an important base in the eastern Mediterranean. *Spy Island* is about Cyprus in the late 1940s. The setting is vintage Annesley, and the book has a background of very big issues as Britain and the communists struggle for political control (Annesley 1950). This book was not published until after Webster's death in April 1949. The plot is implausible, there is gratuitous violence together with some very nasty people, and Fenton, so tolerant in the 1930s, now expresses a great deal more prejudice against people of other classes and race. These bitter comments are valuable now because they show the depth of some of Britain's social problems.

### **WEBSTER'S PLACE IN SPY THRILLER HISTORY**

A reviewer commented in 1935 that *Room 14* 'is a good secret service story, fresh, swift and just sufficiently romantic; furthermore, the characters look, act and speak like real men and women' (Anon 1935). The charm of the pre-war books lies in this realism, and also and especially their women, together with their gentle self-mockery, and their amusing and quotable phrases such as 'the well-known eccentricities of wandering Englishmen' (Annesley 1939: 147).

The overall importance of the series is in the settings of the books, their warnings of political dangers and their insights into contemporary points of view. A review of *Spies in Action* in 1937 noted, approvingly, a 'siege in the marshes near the Danube mouth, an out of the way region vividly described' (Green 1937: 714) and it is these characteristic descriptions and settings which now give us a glimpse of a real past world.

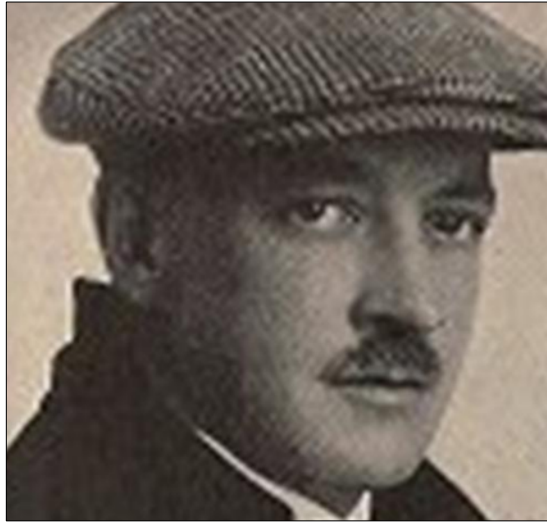


Figure 4: F.A.M. Webster

Webster wrote very good spy thrillers both as Michael Annesley and as F.A.M. Webster. Why is he not listed in spy thriller bibliographies? It was undoubtedly Webster, innovative as always, whose character Fenton was the first of the modern spy thriller heroes: a man operating alone to solve a crisis, and a paid professional operating outside his own country for a real intelligence agency. It is time to give Webster his place in spy thriller history.

## REFERENCES

- Andrew, Christopher (1985), *Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community*, London: Heinemann.
- (1987), 'Secret Intelligence and British Foreign Policy 1900-1939', in C. Andrew and J. Noakes (eds.), *Intelligence and International Relations: 1900-1945*, Exeter: University of Exeter, pp. 9-27.
- (2010), *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5*, London: Penguin.
- Annesley, Michael (1935), *Room 14: A Secret Service Story*, London: Harrap.
- (1936), *Spies in the Web: A Secret Service Story*, London: Harrap.
- (1937), *Spies in Action*, London: Harrap.
- (1938a), 'The Link', in *My Best Spy Story: A Collection of Stories Chosen by their Own Authors*, London: Faber & Faber.
- (1938b), *The Missing Agent: A Secret Service Story*, London: Harrap.
- (1939), *The Vanished Vice-Consul: A Secret Service Story*, London: Harrap.
- (1940a), *Spy Against the Reich*, London: Harrap.
- (1940b), *Unknown Agent*, London: Harrap.
- (1944a), *An Agent Intervenes*, London: Stanley Paul.

- (1944b), *Suicide Spies*, London: Stanley Paul.
- (1945), *Spies Abounding*, London: Stanley Paul.
- (1946), *Spy-Counter Spy*, London: Stanley Paul.
- (1947), *They Won't Lie Down*, London: Stanley Paul
- (1948), *Spy Corner*, London: Stanley Paul.
- (1949), *The Lights That Did Not Fail*, London: Stanley Paul.
- (1950), *Spy Island*, London: Stanley Paul.
- Anon (1935), 'Other new books', *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 April, p. 273.
- Beevor, Anthony (1998), *Stalingrad*, London: Viking.
- Buchan, John (1935), *The House of the Four Winds*, London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Bydder, Jillene (2008), 'Fact and fiction in English-language thrillers with Russian characters: the 1930s', *Library History*, 24:4, pp. 253-261.
- Calder, Angus (1969), *The people's war: Britain 1939–1945*, London: Cape.
- England Athletics (2012), 'Hall of Fame 2012 inductees', <http://www.Englandathletics.org/hall-of-fame/hall-of-fame-inductees/hall-of-fame-2012-inductees>. Accessed 25 November 2015.
- Green, C. R. (1937), 'Detective stproes [heroes] and thrillers', *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 October, pp. 714-715.
- Harrison, Tom (1941), 'War books', *Horizon* 4:24, pp. 416-437.
- Hewison, R. (1977), *Under Siege: Literary Life in London 1939-45*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
- Johns, W.E. (1935), *Biggles and the Black Peril*, London: Hamilton.
- Kipling, Rudyard (1901), *Kim*, London: Macmillan.
- Loughborough Sporting Club (2015), 'Captain Frederick A M Webster', <http://loughboroughsport.com/loughborough-sporting-club/profile/captain-frederick-a-m-webster/#sthash.k58hwcZm.dpuf>. Accessed 26 November 2015.
- Mackenzie, Compton (1932), *Greek Memories*, London: Cassell.
- Mackenzie, Compton (1933), *Water on the Brain*, London: Cassell.
- McNeile, H.C. (1935), *Bulldog Drummond at Bay*, London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Newman, Bernard (1935), *Spy*, London: Gollancz.
- O'Halpen, E. (1986), 'Financing British Intelligence: the evidence up to 1945', In K.G. Robertson (ed.), *British and American Approaches to Intelligence*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp. 187-217.
- Smith, Michael (1996), *New Cloak, Old Dagger: How Britain's Spies Came in From the Cold*, London: Gollancz.
- Webster, F.A.M. (1913), *Olympian Field Events: Their History and Practice*, London: Newnes.
- (1937), *Our Great Public Schools: Their Traditions, Customs, and Games*, London: Ward, Lock & Co.
- (1940), *East of Kashgar: A Secret Service Story*, London: Skeffington & Son.

## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jillene Bydder is a Subject Librarian at the University of Waikato Library. Her research interests include Iceland noir fiction and spy thrillers with Russian characters written between 1880 and 2000.

Contact: [jbydder@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:jbydder@waikato.ac.nz)

**SUGGESTED CITATION**

Bydder, J. (2015), 'Better than Biggles: Michael Annesley's "Lawrie Fenton" spy thrillers,' in Mountfort, P. (ed), *Peer Reviewed Proceedings: 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand*, Wellington: PopCAANZ, pp.1-12. Available from <http://popcaanz.com/conference-proceedings-2015/>.