

A Hero of the Times: “The Saint” in Leslie Charteris’s *The Misfortunes of Mr. Teal*

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Abstract

In *The Misfortunes of Mr. Teal* (1934), Leslie Charteris’s upper-class vigilante, “The Saint,” is heroic in vanquishing criminals of the English upper class, reflecting major ideologies of the time. A conservative, non-revolutionary hero, he cleanses and revalidates that class in its leadership role rather than seeking to remove it.

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Leslie Charteris’s famous hero Simon Templar, “The Saint,” was created in 1928 as a benevolent gentleman vigilante who fights crime outside the law, a rollicking piratical adventurer who craves excitement and follows his own moral and ethical code. Charteris wrote novels, novellas, and short stories featuring the Saint up to 1963, after which further Saint narratives were written by other authors in varying degrees of collaboration with him.

Charteris’s hero does not stay the same during his long career. Different forms of the character appear in different periods, a phenomenon closely related to Charteris’s personal experiences and circumstances (see Beardow, “Parallel Lives”). For example, the Saint of the 1950s, when Charteris as a sophisticated, proud American traveled the world enjoying life, is a wealthy, American playboy doing the same thing. The Saint of the 1930s, when the youthful, idealistic Charteris lived mainly in Britain, is a young Englishman who fights crime, injustice, and war profiteering, and much of Charteris’s 1930s fiction portrays Templar challenging and bringing down morally and criminally corrupt wealthy members of the English upper class. *The Misfortunes of Mr. Teal* contains three novellas, which originally appeared in separate numbers of *The Thriller* magazine under different titles in early 1934, and were first published in one volume later that year: “The Simon Templar Foundation,” “The Higher Finance,” and “The Art of Alibi.”¹ The criminals whom the Saint vanquishes in these novellas are immensely rich aristocratic heads of government and industry, one being an especially odious war profiteer.

As Barbara Korte and Stefanie Lethbridge have noted, “conceptualisations of ‘the hero’ are not fixed . . . but dynamic and fluent” (2). The Saint is heroic for many reasons and in many different ways. He does exhibit the “traditional male heroism” ascribed by Korte and Lethbridge to John Buchan’s Richard Hannay and to “Bulldog” Drummond, the vigilante created by H. C. McNeile (“Sapper”) (22). More specifically, Hannay is a fine exemplar of the “empire hero”—the solitary, “different” gentleman figure on the outskirts of empire steeped in survival skills (see Beardow, “The Empire Hero”). Both Drummond and the Saint also display key characteristics of this hero concept. From the broadest perspective, the Saint character manifests qualities of the Western heroic warrior tradition from Homer through the ages. It is widely acknowledged that classical Western

¹ *The Misfortunes of Mr. Teal* has also been published under the titles *The Saint in England* (1941) and *The Saint in London* (1952).

concepts of the hero inform perceptions of heroism in the modern world (see Carroll, *The Western Dreaming* and Kendrick, *The Heroic Ideal*), and the Saint is part of this tradition; like Achilles he is “larger, stronger, brighter than normal humans” (Carroll 76), and like the classical hero he is “skilled in war, counsel, and strategy” (Adkins 36). He has a great “name,” is wealthy, and has the cleverness, eloquence, and wit of Odysseus. He is frequently represented in Charteris’s fiction as the medieval exemplar of the Western hero: the knight-errant, a refined, shining figure righting wrongs and defending the weak according to his moral code. The Western warrior tradition can be seen in most thriller heroes; Glyn White has noted “the idea that war was a character-forming arena for heroism current in the genre of the thriller since the late 1910s,” using as examples both McNeile’s “Bulldog” Drummond and the well-known Biggles character created by W. E. Johns (260).

In 1930s Britain, however, a set of circumstances peculiar to the era also helped shape readers’ perception of Simon Templar’s heroism. This essay will argue that the defeat by the Saint of the aristocratic, upper-class evildoers portrayed in the three novellas of *The Misfortunes of Mr. Teal*, accompanied by strong denigration and comical mockery of the established leadership order they represent, validated major ideologies within the contemporaneous political and social environment of British society, and was thus highly conducive to readers of the book perceiving its vigilante protagonist as a hero. But it will also be argued that the inherent upper-class standing of the Saint himself, supplemented by a range of subtle qualifications in the text’s derogation of established authority and in its aversion to war, define him as an ultimately non-revolutionary, conservative hero who seeks to cleanse and redeem, rather than destroy, the established order—and that these circumstances, far from detracting from his heroic standing, enhance it through further, more specific ideological perceptions of government and society in Britain at the time.

In most of Charteris’s 1930s fiction, the whole upper level of society, including aristocrats, public school men, politicians, senior government bureaucrats, and powerful and ruthless corporate businessmen, is portrayed as riddled with incompetence and corruption that runs the gamut from useless stupidity to criminality, war-mongering fascism, and utter evil. The political and social environment in which this fiction emerged was dominated by the Depression (the Slump), which began with the Wall Street crash of 1929. While there was considerable regional variation in unemployment, and much of the decade saw growing living standards and increasing levels of prosperity (Stevenson and Cook ch.1; Pugh 96-97), in the early years in particular Slump-related problems and the way the National Government approached them caused a great deal of social and political unrest among the middle and upper classes as well as the working class, with both an increase in Leftist sentiment and the birth of the British Union of Fascists. The social protest literature of the 1930s focused on the suffering of the people. Three prominent examples are Walter Greenwood’s *Love on the Dole* (1933) and George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), the last becoming one of the best-known books of the period.

Many, especially much of the educated younger generation that included the young Leslie Charteris, felt that society’s problems, including the calamity of the Great War, had come about because useless elected governments had been dominated by incompetent old men within the upper, traditional governing class (Harvey 152; Orwell, *The Road* 140; Goldring 46). Ross McKibbin provides a useful description of the English upper class relevant to the period:

the members of the extended royal family and senior functionaries of the court, the old aristocracy, the political elites attached to the peerage by birth, marriage, or social affiliation, a good part of the gentry, many of the very wealthy and a few who were none of these but who had achieved rapid social ascent one way or another. (*Classes and Cultures* 2)

A strong anti-war movement also developed, highlighted by prominent public expression and popular literary works, such as Erich Maria Remarque's famous novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) and many others, during the late 1920s phenomenon known as "the warbook boom." While the prevention of war was the focus of anti-war feeling, popular antipathy centred in particular on those believed to be war-profiteering arms merchants and industrialists, a perception strongly promulgated in H. C. Engelbrecht and F. C. Hanighen's 1934 best-seller *Merchants of Death*. This book convincingly argues that major arms suppliers developed monopolistic and extremely lucrative positions within national economies by claiming special, patriotic relationships with governments of the countries in which they operated. In the interwar period widespread antipathy to such figures, believed to have helped bring about the conflict, generated a general popular distaste for wealthy businessmen or government officials (see Grandy ch. 2) and "profiteers," often seen as the *nouveaux riches* of the 1920s, which included industrialists and speculators (McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures* 54). Manipulative, unscrupulous profiteers were believed to be able to buy their way into powerful circles through their wealth and influence, and were often directly associated with the traditional governing class.

The Misfortunes of Mr. Teal strongly reflects the political and social ideologies of the day. The wealthy, powerful senior government officials and business magnates targeted by the Saint are depicted both as ruthless criminals and as typical of those seen as having caused a generation's suffering through war and economic depression. In the first novella, "The Simon Templar Foundation," Templar's enemies are Lord Iveldown—"one of those permanent Government officials who do actually run the country" (36)—and various other prominent persons in government and society, who have been involved in corrupt arms supply dealings and are willing, for personal profit, to support efforts to create war. The Saint extorts money from the perpetrators in exchange for the evidence of their wrongdoing, using it to set up a foundation to aid the families of war casualties and promote peace.

The retribution that men in positions like those of Iveldown and his associates are made to endure by the Saint was satisfying and reassuring to 1930s readers, validating their ideological perceptions and confirming Templar as heroic. The novella's narrator reinforces this through derogatory comments about the "public school code" and the deviousness of politicians (66, 36). Iveldown is an odious personage; he is unhealthily fat; pompous, false, and indirect in speech; and weak and cowardly in that he employs others to do his criminal work at a distance. Templar's stature is heightened by Iveldown's cowardice and venality, which stand in contrast to and highlight the Saint's antithetical qualities: fit, strong, brave, and generous, and promoting the welfare of society rather than corruptly exploiting it.

As the title of the three-novella collection suggests, an important part is played in "The Simon Templar Foundation," and in the other two novellas, by the unrewarded

efforts of Scotland Yard's Chief Inspector Claud Eustace Teal to apprehend the Saint. The Teal character reflects, in broad terms, a figure widely seen in English crime fiction: the honest, ploddingly competent policeman who is outshone by the brilliant amateur. The Saint is Teal's *bête noire*; throughout much of Charteris's 1930s fiction, Teal attempts to arrest and charge him but is always thwarted. Templar taunts him unmercifully, makes jokes at his expense, and constantly outwits him. Teal wears a bowler hat, has a pink, chubby face and is originally working class; one of the character's functions, like that of the Saint's unintelligent but fiercely loyal American gunman follower Hoppy Uniatz, is to accentuate the Saint's heroic stature through contrast with his own struggling efforts and comical behavior.

Teal, however, also represents what might be termed the executive arm or mechanism of the State, which is supposed to be led and guided wisely by its leaders. In "The Simon Templar Foundation," Teal is confused; neither the Saint, who wishes to exert his own justice and retribution, nor Iveldown and his associates, who fear their crimes will be revealed, will assist him. The hapless Inspector is a metaphor for a struggling, confused society and powerless State led astray by leadership betrayal (104, 106). In almost all of Charteris's fiction where Teal appears, he can only function efficiently when the Saint allows him to, gives him the information he needs, or otherwise facilitates his actions. In effect, where the State fails—both in terms of its traditional leadership and in terms of its executive arm—the Saint steps in to restore justice and stability. At a time of national depression and loss of confidence in traditional government authority, his standing as a hero is once again affirmed.

The First World War is a central element in the novella. War is an important factor in much crime fiction of the period and beyond; a recent analysis of the impact of war on the work of Agatha Christie has noted that "detective fiction is a rich resource for investigating the social, psychological, and political concerns that inflect cultural and literary memorializing of war" (Mills and Bernthal iii). More specifically, Sarah Trott's analysis of hard-boiled crime fiction as "war noir" sees Chandler's Philip Marlowe as a "traumatized veteran of war" (x), and the War looms largely in the very popular 1920s and 1930s "Bulldog" Drummond novels of H. C. McNeile mentioned earlier. The vigilante Drummond is an aggressive former soldier; as Christopher Doyle has pointed out, "what especially distinguishes the Bulldog Drummond series is an intimate and inherent engagement with the legacy of the First World War and its resultant cultural and economic legacy" (39).

In "The Simon Templar Foundation," the War created the opportunities for the corruption of Iveldown and his associates and the undermining of proper and just government. An attempt on the Saint's life is made by "a military-looking man" (16), and the conflict is the reason for the Foundation itself, which Templar will set up to "be devoted to the care and comfort of men maimed and crippled in war, to helping the wives and children of men killed in war, and to the endowment of any cause which has a chance of doing something to promote peace in the future" (42). The text conflates Iveldown's malignant nature with the horror of the War, as Templar reiterates both the physical cost in lives of Iveldown's treachery and the humane need for the Foundation (41-42). Templar's comments and his efforts to promote peace at the expense of Iveldown and his cronies were comforting for readers, reaffirming contemporaneous ideologies about those responsible for the War and again defining Templar's actions as heroic.

In “The Higher Finance,” the Saint’s adversary is “one of the richest men in Europe” (141), Ivar Nordsten, who wishes to forge gilt-edged securities to enable him to control the world’s supply of paper. His brother, rescued and guided by the Saint after imprisonment by Nordsten, impersonates Nordsten to run his business honestly, and provides the Saint with an alibi for his activities.

Again the villain is an enormously wealthy and powerful figure who is made accountable for his transgressions. Templar not only presides over the death of the criminal perpetrator, but generates a huge force for good in the world in that the new Nordsten will run his global enterprise honorably and fairly. Such an outcome was reassuring for contemporaneous readers, and the Saint’s achievements make him heroic.

War, if less directly, and economic depression also make themselves felt in this novella. The caretaker of Templar’s Weybridge mansion, Orace, is clearly an ex-soldier.² He greets a woman being sheltered by the Saint “as if he were addressing a dumb recruit on a parade-ground” (143). Gruff in speech and afflicted with a limp, he very much fits the mold of a wounded soldier still intensely loyal in civilian life to his former officer, linking Templar to the bravery and sacrifice of the country’s fighting men. But more broadly, all is not well in England; the introductory pages of the novella, where the Saint and his follower Hoppy bemoan the monotony and insipidity of London nightlife, are discernibly redolent of the phenomenon noted by Sarah Trott for film noir: a “darkening” of American and German society respectively after the Second and First World Wars, where German society was seen by philosophers and sociologists as hollow, directionless and bland (xiii). The wider context of all the novellas in “The Misfortunes of Mr. Teal,” with betrayal and corruption at the highest levels, hints at the kind of urban phenomenon Trott identifies in Chandler’s work: a “location that smacks of corruption, vice and postwar disillusionment” (xi). The socially bleak environment represents a destitute England, sunk in malaise and economic decline. The narrator links the dreary, depressing evening with government, indicating the situation is the result of “legislators” (114), implicitly the same generation of traditional leaders whose incompetence led to both the catastrophe of the First World War and the Slump. The heroic Saint remains unaffected by and distinct from such enervating influences, his mission being to rectify the wrongs brought about by them.

Chief Inspector Teal is again in this novella primarily a figure of fun, and also flounders with multiple impersonations that occur within it. Teal’s floundering and stumbling with identities and his inability to understand what is happening can be seen as the inability of formal authority and government to manage and deal with a society where legitimate identity and concepts of truth, trust, and stability have become transitory and without substance—until they are heroically reestablished by the Saint.

The third novella, “The Art of Alibi,” sees the Saint battle Sir Hugo Renway, a “Justice of the Peace and a permanent official of the Treasury” (232), who is planning a huge robbery of gold bullion using a submarine and an airplane and who tries to frame Templar for murder. The familiar pattern again emerges in a government official who has betrayed public trust. The Saint makes it clear he was initially suspicious of Renway because he was the type of man who would wear a top hat and spats (235), and government officials are ruthlessly ridiculed by the narrator as good-for-nothing, useless

² In the first Saint novel, *Meet the Tiger* (1928), Orace is described as having been “a Sergeant of Marines, [who] had received a German bullet in his right hip at Zeebrugge” (10).

idlers (265-66). Like the cowardly Lord Iveldown, Renway is physically and emotionally repulsive, and malignantly cunning. Despite an “air of well-fed smugness” (266), he has a “deadness of flesh” (281) and becomes increasingly unbalanced, manifesting “the unnatural porcine opaqueness of a man whose mind had ceased to work like other men’s minds . . .” (279). As with Iveldown, the binary opposition between the malevolence, weakness, and physical repugnance of Renway and the leadership, bravery, fine appearance, and physical strength of the Saint underscore the latter’s heroic nature.

Templar’s contrast with Renway is probably at its greatest when the latter claims to the disguised Templar that he, Renway, is the Saint (285). The outraged narrator excoriates Renway as “an over-fed, mincing, nerve-ridden, gas-choked, splay-footed, priggish, yellow-bellied, pompous great official sausage” (311). In listing these qualities in Templar’s enemy diametrically different from those of Templar himself, the text further develops some of the powerful ideologies discussed earlier: upper class leaders and officials physically and morally inadequate for their responsibilities (“over-fed . . . nerve-ridden, gas-choked, splay-footed . . . sausage”), uncaring in dainty self-righteousness and condescension towards their constituents (“mincing . . . priggish . . . pompous”), and physical cowards (“yellow-bellied”).

War is linked to Renway’s perfidy when the Saint, in his guise as an unemployed aviator, complains that he has no work or money because “war heroes are two a penny nowadays” (272), and Renway immediately asks him to join the gang. Orace, Templar’s loyal and devoted ex-military servant, again plays a notable role in the narrative, and the air battle between the Saint and Renway that forms the denouement of the novella creates a wartime environment.

Teal’s standing as a senior detective is lowered in this novella, and correspondingly the superiority of the Saint over the police and the formal authority of the State are emphasized—not only through the bantering ridicule he endures from the Saint, but also because he himself is the alibi when Renway tries to frame Templar. His later attempt to arrest Templar only results in him being knocked out, gagged, and locked up with his own handcuffs, and he is able to finally capture Renway’s gang only with information provided by the Saint. In addition, the Saint’s ability to right wrongs more directly and efficiently than the police is highlighted at the beginning of the novella; when Templar and Teal are dining in London, the stolid, plodding, honest policeman is forced to admit that while the Saint’s victims have all deserved their fate, he himself is restrained by technicalities: in the words of the Saint, “pulling in some wretched innkeeper for selling a glass of beer at the wrong time, while the man who floats a million-pound swindle gets away on a point of law” (217). At the end of the novella, Teal is blindsided yet again by the Saint with an alibi for another, separate incident.

Overall, then, a major contemporaneous dimension of the Saint’s heroism is his function as an ideological palliative for the anger and frustration felt by many readers of the time. The Saint is a leader in an imaginary, black-and-white world who does the right thing by the community; he is good, his enemies are bad, society is redeemed. He condemns and vanquishes upper-class criminals who have betrayed the nation, stepping in where the formal authorities are powerless and mocking their ineffectual efforts, in doing so confirming perceptions of betrayal by the traditional leadership and incompetence in its institutions. He echoes associated community feelings about the misery of the First World War and the culpability of national leaders in this. His comments about police time being wasted on enforcement of petty laws, which are found

in other Saint fictions of the 1930s, undoubtedly struck a chord with readers, and his direct action, mocking impudence, and bright, clever badinage convey an impression of supreme control. His commitment to justice and fairness helps override any reader concerns about him using violence and breaking the law, or overriding the very laws of evidence that he himself uses to avoid prosecution.

All these factors, however, are not the whole story of the Saint's heroism in *The Misfortunes of Mr. Teal*. It has for some time been understood that certain important crime fiction writers of the period, despite an outward appearance of conservatism and nostalgia, are not in fact supportive of the traditional order. The prevailing social order in the work of enormously popular crime fiction author Agatha Christie, for example, while outwardly serene and cozy, is a facade concealing danger, betrayal, and incoherence (Knight 90-91; Makinen 417; Rowland 42). And in her discussion of the way the wartime detective spy novels of Helen MacInnes and Margery Allingham support the concept of intermodernism, Phyllis Lassner questions the assessment of these authors as traditional and nostalgic, noting they are "all too often branded politically and culturally conservative," with their wartime novels "choreographing nostalgic rearguard actions to save Britain's traditional social and ethical order" (115). In *The Misfortunes of Mr. Teal*, however—notwithstanding Templar's iconoclastic outlawry and radical deprecation of English traditional leadership—the novellas construct and define his heroism in an ultimately conservative way.

This is informed by a seeming paradox. Not only is there no textual outcome in the three novellas that threatens or seeks to alter the contemporaneous political and social system in which that traditional leadership resides, but Templar himself is undeniably, by virtue of his appearance, speech, manner, independent wealth, and general circumstances, part of the upper class he and the narrator so intensely denigrate—even more if his characterization is seen in the context of Charteris's wider 1930s fiction. He is handsome and powerful, wealthy, knowledgeable and sophisticated. He always has seemingly unlimited time and resources available for anything he needs to do. His partner Patricia Holm and his companions are always available at his call regardless of time or expense. The epitome of urbanity and refinement, he can move easily in the highest social circles.

This apparent paradox may be compared with the tension and differences between protagonist and text noted by Martin Rosenstock in "Bloody Patterns," his analysis of binary structures in Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*. Rosenstock argues that the text "dramatizes a confrontation between romance and scientific, rationalist sensibilities" (pt. 2) and may not wholly sympathize with the protagonist Holmes's empiricist world view.

Unlike *A Study in Scarlet*, however—for which Rosenstock argues that the tension manifested between the Holmesian empirical worldview and the romance embodied by the character Hope, which posits divine agency, remains unresolved—in *The Misfortunes of Mr. Teal* the tension is ostensible rather than actual; the paradox can be elucidated. The aristocratic criminals defeated, mocked, and humiliated by the Saint and the narrator, like the real-life governing class widely perceived as incompetent and morally corrupt, have acted dishonorably. They have abnegated their responsibility by not behaving the way men of their station in life are supposed to behave—administering society paternalistically and wisely, promoting prosperity through legitimate business enterprise, taking responsibility for those below their station. Their downfall at the hands

of Simon Templar—an upper-class figure equal in standing to the corrupt figures he vanquishes and who, unlike them, adheres to a strong moral and ethical code—revalidates the importance and centrality of that class, represented by Templar, when it does what it is supposed to do. The Saint is no subversive. No matter how repugnantly his enemies are presented or how much he is depicted as deprecating them, the texts indicate that the problem lies ultimately with them as individuals, not with the social order. In “The Higher Finance,” Templar replaces the criminal magnate Nordsten with his brother as another magnate who will rule beneficently over his business empire. And it is noteworthy that in “The Simon Templar Foundation,” Iveland and his cronies are not forced to resign and presumably continue in their public offices. The Saint, through his beneficial actions, reaffirms for readers the established leadership of the upper class at a time when, in the real world, it was perceived to have failed in its role. Despite the Saint’s iconoclastic comments and actions, *The Misfortunes of Mr. Teal* is ultimately supportive of the existing political and social order—suitably chastened. This is a key ideological message in *The Misfortunes of Mr. Teal* and in much of Charteris’s other 1930s work.

It was mentioned earlier that a number of subtle aspects of the narrative, not strident but quietly discernible, further qualify the position of the text in a conservative direction. One is the position of the text on war. In “The Simon Templar Foundation,” while the horror and suffering caused by war is undoubted, its impact is also tacitly attenuated by the Saint’s own actions. In that novella, in the others in *The Misfortunes of Mr. Teal*, and indeed in all of Charteris’s work, Templar is a warrior hero—brave, skilled in combat, knowledgeable of weapons, and willing to take risks—all qualities honed in war, and necessary for victory in war. In an earlier Charteris novel, *The Last Hero* (1930), the Saint and his then companions actually discuss this issue, concluding that while war is evil, they are different from “men and boys who don’t want war,” and are committed to ideals of glorious battle (46). *The Misfortunes of Mr. Teal* does not go as far as this, but it does intimate that not everything associated with war is bad, and that warrior skills are a positive, admirable quality—especially in “The Art of Alibi,” where Templar’s highly developed air combat skills and sacrificial bravery are used to defeat the evildoer.

There is also a textual palliation of the metaphorical reference noted earlier to the austere, desolate England encountered by the Saint and Hoppy in “The Higher Finance.” In answer to Hoppy’s complaint, Templar answers, “You forget that this is a free country, Hoppy” (115). Indeed, in all of his missions and adventures, the Saint frequently utilizes the freedoms of English society—especially in terms of the laws of evidence and legal limitations on police power—to minimize hindrance to his vigilante activities. The text conveys that despite ineffectuality and corruption at the top, the institutions of English society remain valid, even redemptive; it is the incumbent leadership that needs to be expurgated, not the social and political system.

Perhaps the most cogent of the underlying support for established institutions in *The Misfortunes of Mr. Teal*, however, is the subtle mitigation of Chief Inspector Teal as a figure of ineffectuality and ridicule; unsuccessful he may be, but he is not entirely without a nascent power and ability. In “The Simon Templar Foundation,” while Templar is away from the flat he shares with his partner, Patricia Holm, Teal and his sergeant arrive with a search warrant. Although Holm attempts to distract him, Teal cleverly turns the tables on her and finds what he is looking for. Certainly, the text makes clear that the absence of Templar is the deciding factor in Teal’s victory—Holm constantly asks herself “What would the Saint have done?” (96). But she herself is described as “the companion

in outlawry of a prince of buccaneers,” as having “in her blue eyes, so amazingly like the Saint’s own, the same light of flickering steel” (94), and even, in “The Higher Finance,” she “talks like a man” (185) —a characterization suggesting that Teal’s feat is an indirect victory over the Saint himself.

At the beginning of “The Higher Finance,” the text hints, with a faint air of menace, at a nascent efficiency on the part of Teal and the authorities. While Templar and Hoppy are waiting outside a nightclub at two o’clock in the morning, Teal suddenly appears, his hand falling on Templar’s shoulder. Other big, solid men under Teal’s direction quietly materialize out of the gloom, without even the Saint at first noticing: “All at once, without a sound that his unguarded ears had noticed, the deserted street had acquired a population . . .” (119). The text again reminds us that, for all his comical frustrations, Teal—and the State—have the potential to wield decisive power. And in “The Art of Alibi,” Teal’s humiliation is lessened when he surprises Templar by tracking him down; notwithstanding the Saint’s assistance, Teal’s opportune arrival ensures that the whole gang is captured. Indeed, the narrator praises Teal in that “whatever his other failings may have been, Chief Inspector Teal was a kind of sportsman. He could take it, even when it hurt” (308). Here Teal, and by implication the State, is not only capable of wielding power efficiently, but can be *trusted* to do so in a fair and just way. Teal’s failures are misfortunes, as the title of the book states, and occur because his opponent is the heroic Templar, more able than common humanity; they do not result from incompetence or corruption. The text thus acknowledges, in a quiet, understated way, that the State and established authority do have a capacity for wisdom and power.

The text’s redemption and revalidation, rather than repudiation, of the concept of established, upper-class leadership; its mitigation of criticism of established authority; and its presentation of military skills in a positive light are rooted in further key ideologies extant in contemporaneous British society—a situation that establishes the Saint’s heroism even more firmly in that society. The anti-war sentiment of the day, for example, as expressed in the promulgation of many positions and demands on the prevention of war, in contemporaneous war literature, and in moves at the international level in the pursuit of future peace, were mostly predicated on the egregious nature of war; revolutionary pacifist perspectives that pursued total disarmament were not central to the movement, with individual soldiers who had fought bravely rarely criticized and across society usually acclaimed. Templar’s warrior skills, an integral quality of the Western warrior hero, substantially contributed to his popularity and heroic standing.³

More broadly, the Saint’s nature and circumstances aligned with non-revolutionary expectations of leadership and society. Despite substantial inequalities in wealth and opportunity, it was always unlikely that in Britain there would be an extreme response, as in Germany. There had been no calamitous defeat to generate grievances, and the impact of the Slump was neither as severe nor as prolonged as in Germany and the United States; nor was it exacerbated through being preceded by a spectacular boom. There was never any mass backing for the extremist British Union of Fascists or the British communists; both were largely irrelevant to mainstream politics. Stevenson and Cook argue that the importance of rising living standards for those in work, uncertainty

³ The high popularity of the “Bulldog” Drummond novels at this time is telling; Drummond and his friends, like the Saint, are vigilantes, but function essentially as a military unit, openly and aggressively flaunting their military experience and soldierly skills.

about what action to take, geographical dispersal and isolation of the most depressed areas, the provision of unemployment relief and the conservatism of British society constrained political extremism (ch. 14). Martin Pugh notes that “after 1918 the Labour leaders . . . enthusiastically endorsed the monarchy and the Empire” (90), and in his analysis of the reasons why a mass Marxist, proletarian movement did not occur in Britain, McKibbin points out that both the Crown and parliament possessed an ideological hegemony. The acceptability of this to the working class “underwrote the existing status-order and preserved the country’s institutions and class-system more or less intact” (*Ideologies* 17).

In his study of the English people, Stephen Haseler argues that the role of the Crown, combined with working class deference and an established belief in inequality on the part of the rulers, has historically limited the idea of political authority resting with the people: “class hierarchies simply couldn’t allow the national culture to be anything else than an expression and celebration of the culture of its ruling classes” (69). In the 1930s, despite widespread dissatisfaction with the perceived shortcomings of the authorities and of traditional leadership, strong feeling did not focus on revolutionary change or abolition of the traditional governing class, but rather on issues of justice, fairness, and competence in government. There was no real challenge to the existing social and political system, reflecting the predominance of apathy and fatalism over revolutionary sentiment (Stevenson and Cook ch. 14). Acceptance facilitated tolerance of the existing order, inhibited political extremism, and ultimately legitimized support for reform through less radical solutions. The fictional corrective actions of Simon Templar, with their attendant qualifications as discussed above, embody these contemporaneous ideological expectations and accordingly heightened his popular appeal as a hero.

In stark contrast to the harsh criminality of his opponents, the Saint conveys a satisfying and comforting aura of ruling-class protective power, of a beneficent master who can be relied upon to put things right. His wealthy, luxurious lifestyle was not offensive to those who could never hope to attain it because such a lifestyle was seen as appropriate for a ruling-class hero. His power, wealth, and status, and facilities like his large, private mansion hidden away near Weybridge in one of the most exclusive parts of England, with its idyllic setting, spacious luxury, fortress-like nature, and secret spaces, impart a feeling of strength and resourcefulness, of preparedness and capability that can be relied on.

It is probably not going too far to suggest that his actions amount to a type of *noblesse oblige*—the idea that privilege entails responsibility and that a noble ancestry requires honorable behavior (*OED Online*). Like the medieval knight-errant who looked to the welfare of the weak, the Saint battles for justice for the powerless and underprivileged. In addition to his special abilities, he has the power that his wealth and class status provide, facilitating his ability to confront evildoers of high social standing and render them accountable.

The Saint of 1930s Britain battles the monsters of the era and fights for justice in a troubled world. While his heroism ultimately derives from many sources and influences, the events, circumstances, and ideologies of 1930s Britain shaped that heroism in a way that graphically defined the character for millions of readers at that time and into the future.

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