



## The Train Ride by Peter Loughran

(French title : Londres Express)

After 60 years of good and loyal services, the Série Noire has abandoned us. It will no longer occupy our sleepless nights unless it is for those prone to nostalgia like me, who are guilty of multiple rereads of our favourite authors. Let's shed a tear in its memory and in memory of its inspired creator.

A few mysteries remain, however, among the some 2,700 titles published. The time has come to perform a post-mortem on this collection and seek out shady texts to exhume. In any case, we did not have to wait until the fatal outcome to flush out La maladie de Chooz and reveal that Maltravers was only a pseudonym used by Frédéric Dard, dissimulating his presence in this series. For that matter, it was during one of those sleepless nights, racking my brains over La maladie de Chooz (subject of bulletin # 5 of the Polarophiles) that, by association, the sulphurous The train ride aroused my curiosity.

Let's go! Let jump into the water: The Train Ride (in the French Série Noire : Londres Express) or the compartment of goose bumps ...Signed Peter Loughran Série Noire # 1136 published in June 1967 by Peter Loughran, American version: MACFADDEN BOOKS 1968, Published by arrangement with Doubledays & Company Translated from the English by Marcel Duhamel  
Forward

Before including the present book in the Série Noire, we hesitated for a long time, weighing the pros and cons, and attempting to determine the exact significance and particularly the origins of such an outburst of morbidity.

Without success we must confess. A psychoanalyst would maybe have a field day with it. But not us. The narrator is an absurd, wannabe philosopher, who is overly obsessive and more indecisive than a suburban Walter Mitty naïve, disarmingly cunning, and irresistibly comical. He is as sincere when he accuses and with such vehemence! Society, religion, and the established order as when he violently attacks their detractors. And if he happens to commit an abomination, he is quick to identify with Saint Agnes and play the martyr.

It is a work that is elusive and impossible to catalogue. Rather than allowing uncertainty to limit our delights, we decided that acting was better than doing nothing at all and we dove in. It is up to the reader to get us out of our dilemma and to tell us if we well jumping into shallow water.

### **M.D.**

Now available in Folio policier N°236 with a 4th of the cover like a punch to the kidney: obviously you will say that I am a monster ; that I never should have gotten drunk in the slums or ran after girls ; or tossed bricks through windows; or behaved so abominably in the train taking me to London. Oh well, it is all of you, with your vices and spitefulness that made me do it. I am no more a monster than you, you bunch of hypocrites!

In the special issue # 20 of the *Inrockuptibles* of August 1995 : 50 years of *Série Noire* : hidden masterpieces, the title *Londres-Express* is put on a pedestal and is illustrated with a full page drawing by Roland Topor. A photo of Peter Loughran is freely included, thus bringing his contribution to the mystery (who would think to contest the innocent photo of the author?).

Pascal Comelade, rocker, composer, post-modern classic and an avid reader of *Série Noire* with reliable taste writes: Our friend Duhamel had enough bad reads to have slipped into his Pullman collection a few isolated titles that are not exactly earth shattering, but that push the envelope to the limit. Hence the wonderful problem of these one-work authors (two at the most), the subject of which railway pilgrims suffering insomnia, despicably accustomed to the smooth talk of ruling cop-collaborating hooligans Yankee style with a chatter of rounds to the chest and excessive jiggling about with long silky legs, could feel a little trapped. [...] *Londres-Express* is to police literature what Barbara Steele is to all the little thin-skinned Sharon Stone clones or what Jules Bonnot was to car racing, for those who like images...if, as it is written in a work by M. René Vienet, *Liberty is the crime that contains all crimes* , so this book is the book that contains all books.

It is about a train ride by a certainly paranoid, appalling individual off his rocker, who is irritated the entire ride by a dragging hangover, a few nuns, and a little girl who is the definition of brat. He trashes society, order, religion and all our age-old words in his soliloquies in a language that shuts Céline up with a bad writer of *L'Officiel du spectacle*. We get all this in a brilliant translation by the famous Marcel. This is not my bedside reading, this is my bedside table.

### **P.C.**

This novel is a must (and I specify clearly: this novel is not a whodunit). In *Les auteurs de la Série Noire* Claude Mesplède and Jean-Jacques Schleret inform us that : Loughran Peter (1938) Irish. Born on January 27, 1938 in Liverpool. Wishing to become a Catholic priest, he studied at the Priory of Bishop's Waltham in Hampshire, but dropped out after one year. He claims to have had since then about one hundred jobs that took him all over the world: laboratory assistant, dock worker, putting up scaffolding, bodyguard, night class language professor...

He remains famous for *Londres-Express*, his only book released in France, translated by Marcel Duhamel ... One must consider that to write this book while working part-time as an unskilled worker making 5 £ a week, Peter Loughran produced 300,000 words and only kept 65,000 of them. After a long disappearance, he showed up again with *Dearest* (1983), an aggravating soliloquy by a London taxi driver who gives his opinion on everything even when it is not solicited. He meets a girl, kills her and indulges in the disgraceful practice of making his victim and her

unborn child his fetish. It was followed by Jacqui (1984), another gruesome love story and the Third Beat (1987).

Who could believe these tales? Don't come and tell me that *Londres-Express* is the first book by an amateur writer. We figured it out for *Pas d'orchidées pour Miss Blandish* – a certain James Hadley Chase (see bulletin # 2). Unless we are going to ascertain that Peter Loughran is a zombie or an alien.

*Londres-Express* is a sick, disconcerting book, spreading its perversity to the point of disgust. It has such qualities, however, that it leaves no reader indifferent and one closes it stunned, having the feeling of being cleverly tricked by an author who buttered us up and fried us in the flames of hell. All the way through, we pardoned – by our brief sympathy, and always our indulgence – his pathetic hero.

The author is merciless and he makes us pay a high price for our human weaknesses. We were left with no way out, exactly like we were by the scenario in Woody Allen's last film, *Match Point*, which left us with a feeling of uneasiness and a wounded soul.

The author manipulated us, the readers, to bring us to feel some sympathy for a perfect bastard, thus obliging us to question ourselves. This remains, perhaps, the ultimate sign of talent. Can one discover who this author is?

The key to the mystery is found, of course, in Marcel Duhamel. His preface cleverly eludes the questions that could spontaneously come to mind, but does not resist a true critical examination. (The question is rather to ask oneself how he avoided so long the readers' curiosity and kept the exegetes from showing up.) It was surely not a novice author who, in his first attempt, mastered what great authors often take many years to acquire.

Let's look at Marcel Duhamel's favourite authors, those for whom he is ready to don his translator's hat to impose a title that does not fit the spirit of the collection. Here, a correlation is immediately established with another unearthed title from across the Channel placed there by the Machiavellian Marcel – I mean Eva.

J.H. Chase stands out in our eyes particularly for the legend of writing of *Pas d'orchidées pour Miss Blandish* in six weekends as a novice author with an idle bookseller. This legend is remarkably similar to the one used when talking about Peter Loughran.

To our greatest pleasure, Marcel Duhamel had struck again! Despite being blinded by the lures that he shook in front of our shortsighted readers' eyes, avid consumers that we are, the veil has been lifted and the Graham Greene hypothesis (already advanced for Chase) has seen the day.

All that remained was to support it in order to present it to the whodunit lovers. With *Londres-Express*, we have the work of a hardened writer; a writer of suspense; a writer excellent with cruel narratives.

In one word, the spitting image of Graham Greene...

It is a narrative totally in the spirit of this author, describing the breathtaking side of things. The regular readers of Graham Greene would have no problem establishing the connection. Let us have one of his contemporaries, Thomas Narcejac, the master of French suspense, speak: Here is a text entitled the suspense in *Mystery Magazine* # 63 (April 53): Maybe one could assert in a similar fashion that Graham Greene is the master of suspense.

There is, in any case, more than an affinity between G. Greene and E. Poe and it is not surprising that Greene and Poe use double narrative, which means that a certain story takes place on Earth and is the reflection, the shadow carried by another story, the real one, that takes place in Hell.

Personally, I would not have changed a word of this quotation to summarize the *Londres Express*. Everything is said there, in this analysis of the writing of Graham Greene, thirteen years after the publication of this book! I had spoken myself of Hell before finding this magical quotation.

This author's inactivity from 1966 to 1983, especially after the success of *Londres Express* with the French public, stops us in our tracks.

J.H. Chase published his last title, *Ça ira mieux demain*, *Carré Noir* # 499 in the fourth trimester in 1983 (a definitive stoppage in his prime, a stoppage that coincided with the death of his literary agent who ensured with discretion the separation between the author and the editor). Another point of interest: Chase is exempt from book reports with Gallimard. The change in routine that Marcel Duhamel put in place could not continue with a new agent without the risk of arousing curiosity.

It is at this precise moment in 1983 that Peter Loughran starts his services again with three titles in the same vein, books that were not translated into French despite the success of the first. No French editor wanted it. Why? The cruelty of the texts was a problem? Was it maybe the lack of a translator who was as good as the first?

On the cover of the American edition, a huge headline by a critic from the magazine *Best-Sellers* declares: The author stands out as a possible successor to Graham Greene. ... is this just an opinion or a wink? In both cases, this supports our conclusions.

Of course one is going to counter by contending that this clue is unconvincing. We willingly admit it, but we are dealing with literature, we are addressing amateurs of mystery and we can permit ourselves to express that which is more than an intimate conviction.

We published in bulletin # 2 of *Polarophiles Tranquilles* an inquiry into masked authors, taking the J.H. Chase / Graham Greene duo as an example.

This exceptional author was the main craftsman for the success of the *Série Noire*. In this tandem, the role played by Chase is purely a façade: his job is to turn the attention away from the

real author who protects his prestige.

It was enough to establish for the public that Brabazon Raymond alias J.H. Chase was a real author, which was done with the help of Frédéric Dard as a circumstantial witness (see the outside back cover of F. Dard's novels with Fleuve Noir).

Graham Greene, journalist, editor, frequent traveller, intelligence agent, had lived an incomparable life. He had observed humanity by participating in the adventure of the British secret services. He had also fulfilled the duties of secretary for Philby, the spy who managed to pass on the British atomic secrets through the iron curtain, and then took on the duties of an honourable correspondent, notably in Africa, Indochina, and in the USSR, using his notoriety as a writer as cover.

In his private life, he continued to use means of dissimulation sharpened during his secret service activities, until the English Internal Revenue took interest in his earnings and discovered his tax evasion tactics and decided to clamp down on him, stripping him of his rights to author in England. Sir Graham Greene saw himself imposed with a definitive fiscal exile, everything done with a British discretion in honour his stature (he went on to receive the *Compagnon of Honour*, a title delivered at Buckingham Palace on March 11, 1966, with permission to come back for only one day for the ceremony by special formal authorization). He left England definitively accompanied by James Hadley Chase...they shared the same tax advisor at the center the scandal.

With Eva, Greene/Chase had already given Marcel Duhamel a first non-detective novel out of place in the *Série Noire*. He could not repeat offence with a second one causing Chase to lose his stature as a writer of whodunits (second-class writer, popular writer, commercial writer, successful writer, sic) that permitted him to provide the *Série Noire* with regular best-sellers protected from the curiosity of the critics and the journalists. After Eva, the first intriguing title that Thierry Maulnier cites in his preface to *Les clefs d'oeuvre de la littérature d'action* devoted to J.H. Chase, Greene was forced to find another editor or use another pseudonym.

In *Faites danser le cadavre*, published in 1947 under the signature of Chase, one already finds the description of a rape followed by a murder; a cruelly life-like description of the life that is leaving, the soul separating from the body. In this work, the maleficent hero called Rollo, a name that reappears in *Le troisième homme* (signed Graham Greene this time), with the character Rollo Martins. Again, a coincidence! That is no longer so when one discovers that the scenario for the film *Le troisième homme* (1949), one of the ten best films in the history of cinema worldwide, is, in its opening, a very loyal adaptation to the novel *N'y mettez pas votre nez* published in 1948 and signed by Chase, unless it is the other way around...

The same Thomas Narcejac in *La fin d'un bluff* released in 1949 was not affectionate with his dear colleagues of the *Série Noire*: One has the impression that Chase is writing with an imaginary reader in mind. Is the dose of horror enough? A little more. Here a little is added. There it is. He will have his money's worth. This passage is devoid of any literary value and Chase is too gifted to not know it. But, he is paid to massacre the characters in an entertaining way. So, he respects the contract, even if he despises his fans. The hostess also wriggles and shakes her hips and blinks her eyelids so that the client is satisfied. Cruel writers are often great writers who chose to be taxi-boys.

The remarks are addressed to Chase; those are the rules of the game, but are they not aimed at Graham Greene?

One understands that to protect oneself from such attacks a writer who defends his moral integrity uses a pseudonym like a bulletproof vest.

I must specify that I condemn this text with a bias. I believe that the writer transcends the genre. I found a lot of very good books, unjustifiably despised, among the whodunits and spy novels. A book like *Pas d'Orchidées* does not attract ten million readers if it does not have solid qualities, even so *Londres-Express* is not an eye-catching book. As I try to show, the writer injects a metaphysical dimension that touches us.

I will finish by giving a lingering impression.

What jumps off the page here is the quality of the translation: magnificent, célinienne. After having read the English version and the translation at the same time, I dare to say that the translation is better than the original. The translator's cuts are sensible in making the character more universal and closer to the reader.

Intuition tells me that Marcel Duhamel worked on this translation in collaboration with Frédéric Dard.

I have no recollection of Marcel Duhamel's translations at the beginning of the *Série Noire*, but I know that Marcel Duhamel had called on the talent of Frédéric Dard to co-adapt *Pas d'Orchidées pour Miss Blandish* for the Grand Guignol theatre in 1950. The latter covered himself using the pseudo Eliane Charles for this first collaboration.

He repeated the offence in exposing himself by co-signing the adaptation of *La chair de l'Orchidée* with Marcel Duhamel in 1955, also for the Grand Guignol. F. Dard also adapted *Traquenards* there in 1955, this time using the signature Frédéric Valmain.

(The play *Pas d'Orchidées pour Miss Blandish* was revived in May 1977 in Geneva, the adaptation being signed with one name: Frédéric Dard).

Having already worked together, it is therefore plausible that they got together for the sophisticated translation of *Londres-Express*. But this collaboration is just a personal hypothesis...the clues of the work of F. Dard are too present to pass up this nagging impression. One finds on the last page of *Londres-Express* the expression *in distancing myself from dare-dare*, familiar to the readers of *San Antonio*.

The method of this novel was taken up by Frédéric Dard in certain « James Carter »s to describe the vileness of the high society that accepted him after that even though he looked at them without leniency. Going back to a pseudonym permitted him to get around this difficulty.

The protagonists did not judge it wise to divulge their secrets of production. I will remain frustrated in not being able to know the end of the story.

I hope to have given you the desire to re-read this sulphurous book and I am already waiting for your reactions with great interest.

Thierry Cazon