

## Destination Unknown

1954

The Cold War sets the political backdrop for this book. A top nuclear fission expert, Betterton, working at the new Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Harwell, Oxfordshire, disappears. Betterton had 'usual Left Wing tendencies'. Mrs. Betterton, his abandoned wife defends her husband's reputation when the British Secret Service question her: he 'wouldn't sell secrets or betray secrets. He wasn't a communist.' Communist 'witch hunts in America', where Betterton had worked previously, are discussed. Betterton had a secret meeting with someone, who 'was had up before the Committee of Investigation of un-American Activities', the week before his disappearance. This thriller's beginning has promise.

What prompted Christie to write this book? After the Second World War the British Government set up the Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Harwell, Oxfordshire. It recruited many top international scientists. In 1950, the Head of Theoretical Physics, Klaus Fuchs, was arrested for espionage. Security was stepped up. Fuch's colleague Pontecorvo, researching into nuclear fission, disappeared whilst on holiday. He had defected to the Soviet Union. This was life imitating Christie's art. Christie must have reread her *Big Four*, and thought it deserved a quick update and re-write. Rather than a simple communist defection, she had a different explanation for scientists disappearing.

Christie cobbles together *Destination Unknown*, as a re-write of two previous thrillers; *The Big Four* [1927] and *They Came to Baghdad* [1951]. *The Big Four* was about an international group intent on world domination. In *The Big Four*, a brilliant young British scientist disappears without trace in Paris, leaving his distraught wife and child behind in Surrey. In *Destination Unknown*, a brilliant young atomic scientist, Betterton, disappears without trace in Paris, leaving his distraught wife behind in Oxfordshire. Some of the text and three of the characters in *Destination Unknown*, are almost identical to passages in *They Came to Baghdad*, but without any sparks of danger or excitement that crackle off the pages of that earlier, splendid book. Both *They came to Baghdad* and *Destination Unknown* feature 'indefatigable' small, middle-aged American women, who are not what they seem, with startlingly similar conversations. Mrs Hamilton Clipp in *They Came to Baghdad* says: 'The filth in the streets and the bazaars you wouldn't believe. And the unhygienic rags the people wear. And some of the toilets – why, you just couldn't call them toilets at all!' Mrs Calvin Baker in *Destination Unknown* says: 'They've no idea at all of hygiene in these countries. My dear, you should see the meat in the souks – all smothered in flies.'

The two British Secret Service agents in *They Came to Baghdad*, are Captain Crosbie 'with a bristling military moustache', and Mr Dakin with 'a tired and indecisive face.' In *Destination Unknown*, the two British Secret Service agents are Colonel Wharton, with a 'small military moustache', and Mr Jessop has 'great tiredness' in his eyes. Both books have detailed descriptions of air travel. In *They Came to Baghdad* 'Air hostesses, with the authority of nursery governesses dealing with feeble-minded children'. In *Destination Unknown* 'The air hostess, with that nursery governess brightness'.

One of the few interesting things in *Destination Unknown* is the discussion about committing suicide. Jessop, the British Agent prevents Hilary Craven from taking an overdose. Jessop asks

'You don't think of it as – wrong?'

Hilary: 'Why should it be wrong? It's my life.'

Jessop 'I'm not taking a high moral line myself, but there are people, you know, who think it's wrong.'

Hilary: 'I'm not one of them.' ....

Jessop: "you more or less welcome the idea of death?"

'Yes'.

'Good,' said Jessop cheerfully....'you see the form of suicide I'm offering you. I'm suggesting that you should become Mrs Betterton.'

Jessop is quite harsh: 'Self pity is one of the biggest stumbling-blocks in the world today.' Jessop never suggests Hilary might see a psychiatrist; he saved her life in order to use it in the service of her Country. There is a very similar discussion about suicide in *Towards Zero* [1944]. In *Towards Zero*, Angus MacWhirter fails in his attempt to commit suicide, and is 'admonished by a sanctimonious magistrate for doing the common-sense thing with a commodity which belonged to him and to him only – his life'. 'To commit suicide was the most logical and sensible thing that could be done by a man in his position', exactly like Hilary Craven. Craven and MacWhirter are both of sound mind, but have absolutely nothing to live for. McWhirter later prevents another character from committing suicide. By the end of both books, both characters have found love, the reason for living again; journeys end in lovers meeting.

The stream of characters that are constantly introduced and then almost immediately abandoned gives the narrative of *Destination Unknown* a very restless, uneasy feeling, like its title. Perhaps Christie was trying to write from Craven's point of view. Hilary Craven's character is, after all, looking at everyone she meets, trying to assess them, to see if they are 'secret agents' from whatever organisation took Betterton. Craven had no idea what to expect, or how to recognise the secret contact except the agreed code word 'snow'. It is tiring for the reader to remember details on all these characters, not knowing if they might turn out to be secret agents or master criminals in disguise later in the book.

Craven has already 'muffed it', by not reciting the poem about Snow, when Henri Laurier speaks the opening code word, but thinks they are simply discussing the weather. Then Laurier whirls out of the book again, when finally you feel you've latched onto someone. Christie also spends a page or two describing a beautiful Swedish starlet 'another Garbo, they say', and her lover, a big business magnate, as well as a French family staying at the Hotel, before they too, are all dropped from the story, without any explanation. There is one very unusual character who appears like a flash of lightning in *Destination Unknown*. Mademoiselle Jeanne Maricot 'a brunette dyed blonde, with a plain but excitingly made-up face.' She has 'no interest whatever in the other occupants of the room whom she dismissed contemptuously in her mind..She was contemplating an important change in her sex life.' There is then a paragraph in italics in French, without any explanation or translation, of Mademoiselle's reasoning behind dropping Pierre and encouraging Jules. Then 'with long graceful steps Mademoiselle Maricot walked out of the small salon and out of the story.' This humorous authorial quip is reminiscent of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and just as startlingly strange, and so uncharacteristic in a Christie.

Craven is never in danger. There is no mystery, no murders, and no pace. The other scientists all pontificate tediously, giving their criticisms of life in the Western World, as they travel together. Hilary's inner thoughts are: 'Why do you decry the world we live in? There are good people in it. Isn't a muddle a better breeding ground for kindness and individuality than a world order that's imposed, a world order that may be right today and wrong tomorrow?'

Eventually Craven is led into the secret Scientific Institute, hidden inside a Leper Colony in the Atlas Mountains. The building complex had everything a scientist could want in terms of laboratory equipment, as well as cultural, sport and other entertainments for the evenings. The food is excellent, and there are 'handsome prostitutes..as purveyors of sex to those men who had no wives with them'. Most of the Scientists are happy and content, a few are not. They chafe against the complete captivity; living in a 'golden cage' stops them thinking. The Director of the Institute gave a talk, and was clearly a powerful orator: 'In spite of herself, Hilary was stirred and uplifted'. The Director is compared to Hitler for his powerful rhetoric. Afterwards Peters said gloomily: 'I suppose it always comes to the same thing in the end. A madman who believes he's God.' An echo of *They Do It With Mirrors*; Lewis Serrocold, also a director of an Institution, 'wanted to be God.'

'The Master', Mr Aristides is a wealthy businessman, and has 'collected many things in my time: pictures, ceramics, stamps' until 'there was not very much more for me to collect. So I came at last to collecting *brains*.'

His highly improbable theory is that he will gain a monopoly on all the best young scientific brains in the world, and then hire them out for a price. Hilary argues that the Scientists will not work under such conditions. Mr Aristides mentions 'conditioning' by 'Leucotomy', brain surgery which will render the person 'carefree, conscienceless and in most cases obedient.' *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the novel by Ken Kesey about a mental asylum where leucotomy was performed, was published eight years' later in 1962. Hilary exhibits the true courage of a Christie heroine to argue against Aristides in terms he appreciates: 'I do not believe a contented, suggestible animal will ever produce creative work of real brilliance'. Aristides calmly says 'Time will show. Experiments are going on all the time.' Aristide does not seem to consider that new young scientists were being trained the entire world over, all the time, so his monopoly argument is specious.

The final show down between a delegation led by Jessop, who has tracked Hilary, and Aristides is such a damp squib I reread it several times to check I hadn't missed something, or anything at all.

With great sang froid, Aristides claims to be the victim, an innocent philanthropist 'if anything illegal is going on here, it has been no concern of *mine*.'

It is the weakest ending of any Christie I've read. I can see why Harold Ober wanted a rewrite. According to Laura Thompson's biography, Christie was being hounded for £70,000 unpaid income tax during 1954 when she was trying to write *Destination Unknown*. This was equivalent to £1,960,000.00 today according to the Bank of England inflation calculator. There is a sly reference to income tax as a reason Scientists defect in the text. No wonder Christie lost the plot.

[SH]