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### ERNEST BRAMAH AND TWO NOVELS BY GEORGE ORWELL

In July, 1940, at the height of the Battle of Britain, George Orwell published a review of four reissued novels under the title 'Prophecies of Fascism'. The works reviewed were Jack London's The Iron Heel, H. G. Wells's The Sleeper Awakes, Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, and Ernest Bramah's The Secret of the League. Bramah's novel was first published in 1907 under the title What Might Have Been, but was reissued in 1909 in revised and slightly abridged form under the new title. The novel opens in a United Kingdom under a democratically elected Labour Government, which has brought about mismanagement and chaos. The middle and upper classes are under economic attack, and the armed forces are unable to protect the country and its empire. The bulk of the novel involves the successful campaign of a 'Unity League' representing the middle and upper classes, which destroys this government and establishes a voting system that excludes the poor and increases voting strength in proportion to the taxable value of houses occupied. Bramah was a man of the right, and the novel can be seen as his response to the advances made by the Labour Party in the 1906 General Election. The novel ends in an imagined 1919 with socialism and the Labour Government vanquished, and everyone, including the working classes, better off. In his review – published two years before Bramah died in 1942 – Orwell wondered why 'a

decent and kindly writer like Ernest Bramah [should] find the crushing of the proletariat a pleasant vision?’ and answered: ‘It is simply the reaction of a struggling class which felt itself menaced not so much in its economic position as in its code of conduct and way of life’.<sup>1</sup>

What lay behind Orwell’s description of Bramah as ‘decent and kindly’? The words suggest some knowledge of the writer beyond an acquaintance with his books. At the time Orwell wrote, and today, Bramah is chiefly remembered for two literary creations: the blind detective Max Carrados, and the Chinese storyteller Kai Lung, both of whom appeared in a number of stories and books over a period of many years. Orwell was an admirer of the Max Carrados stories, but not of those involving Kai Lung. In an earlier composite review from 1936 he had written: ‘The much-praised “Wallet of Kai Lung” seems to me tedious. [. . .] It would have been better to have reprinted Ernest Bramah’s excellent detective stories, “Max Carrados” and “The Eyes of Max Carrados.” Together with those of Conan Doyle and R. Austin Freeman they are the only detective stories since Poe worth reading’.<sup>2</sup> Bramah wrote to Orwell in response to this review, thanking him for the kind comments on Max Carrados, while tactfully conceding that with regard to The Wallet of Kai Lung ‘I could not conscientiously dispute that you have good grounds for your lack of interest’.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century very little was known of Bramah, and in 1937 he even

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<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, ‘Prophecies of Fascism’. The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell. Vol. 3, My Country Right or Left, 1940–1943. Eds Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. (London, 1969), 32. First published in Tribune, 12 July, 1940.

<sup>2</sup> George Orwell, A Kind of Compulsion 1903–1936, (London, 1999), 492. The review was first published in the New English Weekly 4 August, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Aubrey Wilson, The Search for Ernest Bramah (London, 2007), 222.

enjoyed the privilege of having the almost complete lack of public knowledge about him made a joke of by Jorge Luis Borges in a one-page ‘thumbnail biography’.<sup>4</sup> This was changed when in 2007 Aubrey Wilson’s well-researched The Search for Ernest Bramah was published. In the opening pages of this book Wilson writes: ‘George Orwell acknowledged that a Bramah book [What Might Have Been] influenced his seminal Nineteen Eighty-Four’, and later on in the book makes the more precise claim that ‘in his letters’ Orwell identifies the book as one of the formative sources for Nineteen Eighty-Four.<sup>5</sup> The opening paragraph of the Wikipedia entry for Bramah, accessed 22 July, 2017, makes a similar claim: ‘George Orwell acknowledged that Bramah’s book, What Might Have Been, influenced his Nineteen Eighty-Four’. This claim seems fated to accompany almost any mention of What Might Have Been on the internet, especially on the part of those wishing to sell Bramah’s book: ‘Orwell credited this book as an inspiration for Nineteen Eighty-Four’; ‘The novel is widely credited as having influenced George Orwell for his 1984’; ‘George Orwell acknowledged that Bramah’s book What Might Have Been influenced his Nineteen Eighty-Four’. What all of these claims – made by Wilson, Wikipedia, and assorted booksellers – have in common, is that no source or reference is provided to back up the claim.

William Steinhoff, in his The Road To 1984, writing about ‘literary forerunners’, notes that his survey of the more important works that appear to have contributed in some way to Orwell’s last novel says nothing about Samuel Butler’s Erewhon, although Orwell praised this book, ‘for there is only the most general connection between it and what he wrote. The same is true of such books as W. H. Hudson’s A Crystal Age and Ernest Bramah’s The

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<sup>4</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. Selected Non-Fictions. Ed and tr. Eliot Weinberger; tr. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine. (New York, 2000), 164.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson, 2, 91; the book title in square brackets is in the original.

Secret of the League.<sup>6</sup>

Is it possible that Orwell's 1940 review, in which he argued that Bramah's novel was one of those that prophesied fascism, has led to the view that it was a direct inspiration for Ninety Eighty-Four? If so, this would be to ignore significant differences between the two novels. Bramah's novel presents the reader with a United Kingdom in which a democratically elected Labour government is opposed and removed, and at the end of the novel voting rights are changed in order to make it impossible for the working classes ever again to gain power – a result clearly approved of by Bramah. In Orwell's novel, democracy has been abolished from the start, and the state depicted is presented as a horrific dystopia. If there is a source for the claim that What Might Have Been / The Secret of the League was acknowledged by Orwell to have inspired Nineteen Eighty-Four, it seems odd that those repeating the claim have not registered it. The magisterial Collected Works do not appear to contain such a source.

Orwell's low opinion of The Wallet of Kai Lung makes it rather unlikely that he read any of the other books structured around the Chinese storytelling character. But a joke that appears in two of these books might suggest the possibility of the (or an) inspiration behind a very well-known if sombre witticism in Orwell's 1945 novel Animal Farm. 'The Story of Wan and the Remarkable Shrub', which appeared in the 1922 book Kai Lung Unrolls His Mat, culminates in a scene in which the Emperor has to impose penance on a certain Hin Ching.

'What, mandarin, is your strict equivalent?'

'Your entirely humble ranks with a district prefect, High Excellence – equal, and above.'

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<sup>6</sup> William Steinhoff, The Road to 1984, (London, 1975), 4.

‘Henceforth you will rank equal and below, thus degrading you appreciably and at the same time enabling you to save a portion of your face.’<sup>7</sup>

Bramah seems to have liked this conceit so much that he recast it a few years later. His 1932 novel The Moon of Much Gladness does not mention Kai Lung by name in its text, but the subtitle of the first edition reads ‘Related by Kai Lung’. Early in the book the rivalry between Pung Chu and T’sin Wong is recounted.

Owing to the effete and worm-gnawed system then in force – the misshapen Code framed by an unscrupulous Literary Dictator of a prehistoric era – while he and T’sin Wong ranked equal in degree, it was with the benumbing sub-clause that he – Pung Chu – ranked ‘equal but appreciably lower.’ Only during an actual state of war could he claim the privilege of being ‘equal and practically on a level’ [...].<sup>8</sup>

In Bramah’s mythical China, just as on Animal Farm, some are more equal than others. Could Orwell have picked up the conceit from Bramah? Alas, there is even less hard evidence that he did than that What Might Have Been / The Secret of the League served as an inspiration for Nineteen Eighty-Four. While it is certain that Orwell had read The Secret of the League, there is nothing to confirm that he ever read either Kai Lung Unrolls his Mat or The Moon of Much Gladness. Even so, the parallel between variations on a conceit about equality in Bramah’s fiction, and a grim joke about the same topic in Animal Farm, seems more striking than the resemblances between The Secret of the League and Nineteen Eighty-

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<sup>7</sup> Ernest Bramah, Kai Lung Unrolls His Mat, (Harmondsworth, 1927), 44. First published 1922.

<sup>8</sup> Ernest Bramah, The Moon of Much Gladness, (London, 1933), 105.

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