

Escape from the leviathan

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The man who was B. Traven by Will Wyatt
(Jonathan Cape £8.50)

It is definitely odd that the author of a number of best-sellers including *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* and *The Death Shi* should have been able to conceal his true name and identity from his editors, publishers, readers and film producers, throughout his writing career. Yet the author who called himself B. Traven was able to do just that. No one ever knew the real identity of this mysterious man who, from his home in Mexico, turned out books that sold millions of copies in many countries and languages. No one knew whether B. Traven was his real name or whether he was really Traven Torsvan, or Ret Marvt or Hal Groves, which are just some of the aliases that Traven used. Both during his life-time and after his death in 1969 many journalists and scholars from several countries tried to uncover the truth about B. Traven's identity and origins. They all failed until 1978 when a young television producer, Will Wyatt, finally cracked the last of Traven's secrets. Those who saw Mr Wyatt's television programme will remember the excitement that attended the discovery first of Traven's birth certificate, and then of his brother and sister who recognised him from photographs. For the sake of those who did not see the programme, I will reveal no further details of the chase or its ending.

Will Wyatt's book will inevitably be compared with that earlier saga of literary detection, A.J. Symon's *The Quest for Corvo*. Certainly both books owe much of their interest to the fascination which the reader feels as he watches the author gradually unravel the personal history of a mysterious literary figure. However, there the resemblance ends. Fr. Rolfe was an infinitely better writer than B. Traven, even though Traven made a fortune from his books and Rolfe (Corvo) died in sordid poverty. The importance of Symon's quest was that it

enabled us to understand better the mind of the man who could write *Hadrian VII* or *The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole*. Besides, Corvo with all his eccentricities and unpleasantness was a far more fascinating character than B. Traven. The interest of Mr. Wyatt's book lies, not so much in what he discovered about Traven but in the process of discovering itself.

Traven did not 'disappear' by accident as the fame - and notoriety - seeking Corvo had done. Traven - perhaps at this stage he should be called proto-Traven - disappeared deliberately. He changed his name, language, nationality, origins and changed them again and again. He became a man without a past, or rather a man whose past was concealed and distorted beneath a mass of deceit, secrecy and false clues.

Traven's career is an indicator of how easy it is to change one's identity in the modern world and yet how difficult it is also. In the twentieth century it is easy to travel to the other side of the world, to immerse yourself among strangers in a great city, to avoid the familiar people of your past who might give you away. There is however, one almighty power from whom no one can hide - the state bureaucracy. Everyone needs a birth certificate, citizenship documents and passport, a visa, a police registration card, a work-permit, a national insurance card - and the state bureaucracy will only issue these if it is certain that it knows exactly who you are. Without papers you have no identity, and without an identity you will not be granted papers. To lose or change one's identity as Traven did may give the loser a sense of inner freedom but it renders him very unfree when he comes up against the powers of the state, its regulations and its frontiers. No wonder Traven regarded state officials with such hatred and delighted in deceiving them whenever possible. Will Wyatt has recorded a characteristic incident that occurred when Traven applied for a Mexican passport in 1956. "How it must have irked him to have to apply for a passport, to hand over photograph, signature and thumbprint for some bureaucrat to approve and file away. And yet, even when apparently at the mercy of officialdom, he

had managed a small revenge against the presumption of his tormentors. The passport was issued in the name of Traves Torsvan. I noticed that a certificate and an electoral registration card also had Traves instead of Traven as the Christian name and asked Senora Lujan (Traven's widow) the reason for this. "It was quite simple" she said: it was the result of one of her husband's little games. "Often when people take down your name and address they mishear or make a spelling mistake and when you notice this you correct them. He allowed them to register his name slightly wrongly and to pass uncorrected into their records. It was none of his business if a mistake was made "... "and", said the Senora, "he had quietly enjoyed the knowledge that he had tricked them into an error and that this might result in confusion. They had a Traves and a Traven; let them sort it out, if they wanted."

I suspect that many people would love to dupe the bureaucracy in this way, but dare not. We are too afraid that one day we might be turned back at Heathrow Airport, rendered jobless like the Captain of Kopernick or that we might lose all our O-levels. Traven dared what many people dream. It made him a fascinating subject for a book and a frustrating mystery for its author. Mr Wyatt's achievement is that he has overcome the frustration and exposed the fascination that lay behind it.