

# THE FORGOTTEN SON OF KENDAL

Bestselling thriller writer Desmond Bagley was born in Kendal in the 1920s. Twenty five years after the author's death, **Jeremy Craddock** pleads for a form of commemoration

**T**hink of famous Kendal people and a familiar list of names springs to mind. It includes Felicity Kendal's dad Geoffrey and historian David Starkey, both born in the town. There would be mention also, of course, of Alfred Wainwright, who came to call Kendal home.

But how many people would think of best-selling thriller writer Desmond Bagley?

There is nothing in Kendal to acknowledge he was a native – no plaques, no statues – and it's never mentioned in the guide books.

Yet his exciting novels – which include *Running Blind* and *The Freedom Trap* – sold in their millions and were translated into 24 languages. They were a familiar sight at paperback stalls in bookshops and at airports in the 1960s and 1970s, nestling beside books by Alistair MacLean, Catherine Cookson and Wilbur Smith.

So, 25 years after he died at the age of 59, the time is surely ripe to honour this long-forgotten son.

Although he would later travel the world researching exotic locations for his books, Desmond Bagley was born in modest circumstances at Number 1, Yard 47, Stramongate, on October 29, 1923. His parents, John and Hannah, sold butter, eggs and cheese on Kendal market. When this livelihood foundered, the couple opened their home in Stramongate to travellers to make ends meet.

In an unpublished memoir he was working on at the time of his death, Bagley wrote: "It became a travellers' house. The modern gentlemen of the road, nearly as rapacious as their forebears, the highwaymen, soon got to know that here was good food and a soft bed... As the years went by the clientele changed. In Stramongate was the St George Theatre... My father obtained casual work as a scene-shifter and was occasionally asked to find room for a minor member of the cast if the Woolpack or the Nag's Head were full. With some of the regular touring companies it became the practice for the leading members

to stay at our house and the minor members to be relegated to the hotels, truly a tribute to my mother's cooking."

Bagley would recall in later life his encounter with a particularly famous visitor, the cinema's greatest Sherlock Holmes.

"I am informed that when I was an infant," he wrote, "I was dandled on the knee of Basil Rathbone and that our house has the

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rather dubious distinction of being the place where Rathbone's uncle, Sir Frank Benson, the finest Shakespearean actor of his time, broke his leg while falling down the steps."

The Bagleys left Kendal in 1929, moving to Bolton and then Blackpool. The next few years in the life of Desmond – or Simon as family and friends knew him from a young age – could have come straight from one of his adventure stories.

He left school at 14 to become a printer's devil (the youngest apprentice in a printshop), before leaving for Africa at the end of the Second World War.

He worked his way through Uganda, Kenya, Rhodesia and South Africa, before deciding to become a journalist. Because of a marked stammer he was unable to get a staff job on a newspaper, so he became a freelance journalist and for a long time was the film critic of the *Rand Daily Mail*.

Writing fiction, however, had long been an ambition. In 1962 – by then married to his South African-born wife, Joan – he began writing a novel, *The Golden Keel*. It was the story of a plan to steal Mussolini's missing

gold and melt it down for a keel to a ship. The premise was based on an anecdote told to him by an old soldier.

Travel and a panoramic sweep of international locations became the hallmark of Bagley's books. His locations were as varied as the jungles of South America and the freezing wastes of Iceland.

Another key to his popularity was the use of technology in his stories. When not researching and writing his books, Bagley enjoyed sailing and motor boating, and was keen on computers, long before they became commonplace.

He was to become a rich and famous novelist. He and Joan moved to Britain in the late 1960s, living in Devon for a number of years, before finally settling in Guernsey.

The novels poured out – *The Spoilers*, *The Snow Tiger*, *The Enemy*, *The Tightrope Men*.

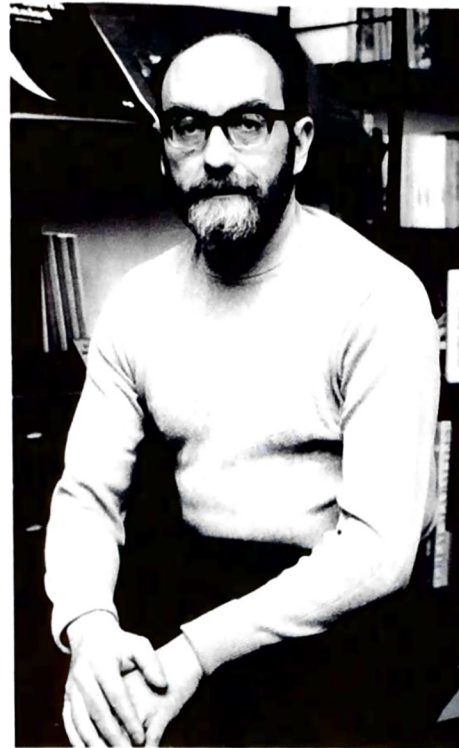
Joan Bagley, who died in 1999, said of her husband's extraordinary productivity: "Once he started the writing of a novel he was flat out for two or three months, nine to five, didn't go out much and didn't entertain much."

**H**ollywood began to take an interest, which led to an invitation to go to California to work on scripts, but it was an experience Bagley did not enjoy. His screenplay of *Running Blind* was never filmed.

One book that did make it to the silver screen, however, was *The Freedom Trap*, renamed *The Macintosh Man*. Directed by John Huston, and starring Paul Newman and James Mason, it never won Bagley's approval.

He was highly regarded by contemporaries Alistair MacLean, Dick Francis and Hammond Innes and was also a mentor to younger writers Duncan Kyle and Jack Higgins.

Higgins says: "Desmond Bagley was the kindest of men when I was an unknown thriller writer and lecturer in Leeds." Bagley told Higgins that one day he would be among the top thriller writers in the world, the sort



At the time of his death in 1983, Desmond Bagley, left, was working on an unpublished memoir, right, which evokes his childhood in Cumbria

of encouragement he needed. Within a short time *The Eagle Has Landed* was a worldwide bestseller.

In the mid-1960s, Bagley, by then a celebrated writer, and Joan visited Kendal in the hope of seeing the house where he was born. He was in for a shock – the building had been flattened to make way for Blackhall

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Road a few years earlier. Bagley joked to Joan that one day a plaque in his honour would have to be placed in the middle of the road on the spot where the house once stood.

Sadly, Desmond Bagley died following a stroke in Southampton on April 12, 1983.

His publisher HarperCollins says interest in his work has inevitably declined since his death, as his books have been superseded by those of writers such as Robert Ludlum and Tom Clancy.

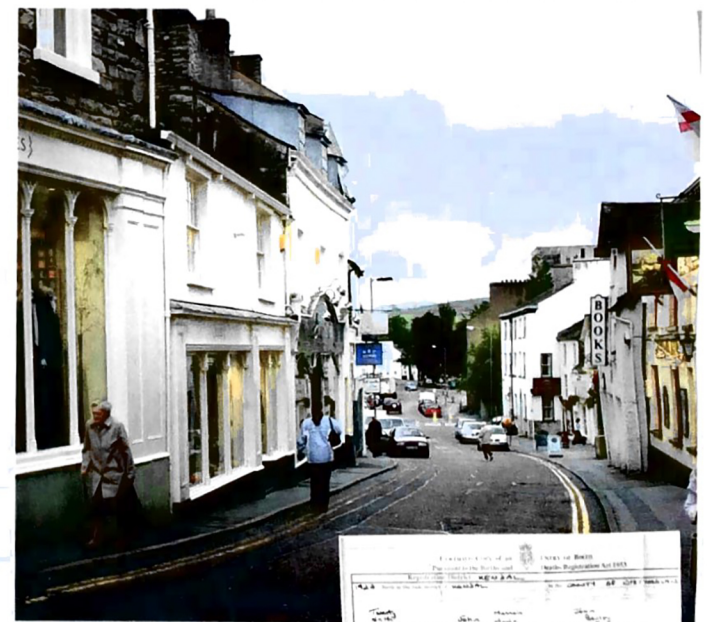
But the millions of readers who've enjoyed his 16 books over the years will never forget him. That must be worth a small plaque in the road in Stramongate at the very least.

So, before I was born, the Kendal adventure began. Kendal, a rather sleepy rural town on the outskirts of the lake district had, as rural towns do, the bi-weekly market. My parents started a business as middlemen, buying the butter, eggs and cheese from the more remote and outlying farms and selling at a market stall in Kendal. The market overflowed the market square into the surrounding main streets, much to the annoyance of motorists who were then beginning to clog the medieval streets, the motor car having achieved a reasonable degree of reliability.

Down Finkle Street and Stramongate the farmers' carts were arranged in serried rows, each bearing its freight of cabbages or turnips or potatoes, the horses which drew them having been turned out to graze on the common land of Gooseholme, an island in the river. These were the real old farm carts, not those we see today with their pneumatic tyres and wheels in bearings, but rough, sturdy structures with wooden spoked wheels with iron rims shrunk on by an expert smith. These carts brought the goods to market, spread manure on the river lands and were good for decades of service.

In the Market Square itself the livestock was for sale. Fens of sheep and bellowing bullocks vied in noise with the tiny chirpings of day-old chicks. The gypsies and the cheapjacks came in their gaily painted waggons and did a thriving, fraudulent business and, on market days, the town was in an almost holiday mood. But once a year there was the Hiring Fair. Though not as great an event as Nottingham Goose Fair it was of greater antiquity, and for a week the town gave itself up to revelry. The gypsies and fairground folk turned up in great numbers, setting up their camps and stalls on the level ground by the river, and for a week it was all the fun of the fair.

The Hiring Fair of each September, just after the harvest, was the time when the farm labourer and farm domestic servant, was released from his yearly indenture, was paid his money and came to the Hiring Fair to re-engage his



Bagley was born in the Stramongate area of Kendal, where his parents opened a boarding house; right, his birth certificate