

**HAMMOND  
INNES**

**HORSHAM'S  
MOST  
CELEBRATED  
AND  
SUCCESSFUL  
STORY-TELLER**



## Introduction

Hammond Innes, one of Britain's most famous and successful adventure story writers, was born in Horsham on 15<sup>th</sup> July in 1913 at 68, Clarence Road. He was the only child of William Hammond Innes, a bank clerk with the Westminster Bank, and Dora Beatrice Chisford. From 1919 to 1924, the family lived at 18, Causeway, a few doors down from Horsham Museum, upon the wall of which a blue plaque records the fact.



After attending a local primary school, Innes achieved a scholarship to Cranbrook School in Kent - a state boarding school with a prestigious reputation. Innes says of this time in his life: *"As a youngster, my imagination had been fired by geography almost as much as by literature."* By the age of 13 he had decided that he was going to become a

writer. And this special interest in geography - in other countries, places and people - was going to be of huge significance in his life and in his writing, as we shall see.

Innes left school at the age of 18, in 1931. Britain was in the middle of the Great Depression - the worst economic crisis in modern history. Unemployment had reached 12% (some estimates put it at 20%) of the working population. Innes, however, managed to find some reasonable and useful employment. Over the next





three years he took on a number of jobs - including teaching, publishing and some bits and pieces of journalism - although the work was temporary and low-paid.

In 1934 he took a position as a columnist with the *Financial News* (now defunct). Here he proved himself to be an effective and valued employee, remaining there for five years. He could well have gone on to make a career as a journalist. The experience proved useful for him. Although he was only churning out what some might see as unimaginative articles on business and the state of the economy, the discipline of writing to deadline, the focus on the details of specific and complex issues, often requiring rigorous research, combined with the general skills required of effective journalism provided an excellent grounding for his later writing. These qualities are apparent in his novels - where ideas, even complex ones, are presented clearly and incisively; where places and situations are brought alive convincingly and with authority; where the telling moment or event is selected, focused upon, and sharply described; and where, most importantly, the reader is hooked, pulled into the story, then obliged to pay attention and to read on. You might notice, too, in many of his stories, that financial misdealing, frauds and dishonourable or illegal sharp practices play a significant part in the story-lines. Their details always convince and this probably owes something to his experiences in the world of business and finance.

## First Publications



The *Financial News* did not pay much, however. By the mid-1930's Innes felt he needed more money - enough to get married. So he decided to try his hand at what his 13 year-old self had aspired to do - to write stories. He wrote a supernatural thriller and showed it to a Fleet Street agent he knew. This agent usually handled articles for journals and short stories syndicated in magazines, so couldn't help directly. But he must also have recognised something worthwhile in the writing - or just as likely Innes nagged him (Innes was both confident in his own abilities and assertive in pushing



himself forward). The agent had contacts. He sent the manuscript to a publisher of potboilers - light romances, cheap thrillers and westerns - books that went out to the hundreds of popular circulating libraries around the country. His story was accepted. So, in 1937, 24 year-old Innes had his first book published. It was called *'The Doppleganger'*.

The deal Innes was obliged to make with the publisher had two major downsides, however. He was contracted to produce three more such thrillers over the next two years; and the advance on each was only £30 per book! Even for this sort of publication such a miserable advance was pitifully low.

Despite struggling to complete the three novels (he needed to find time to write in the mornings before work and then in the evenings after work) he managed it.

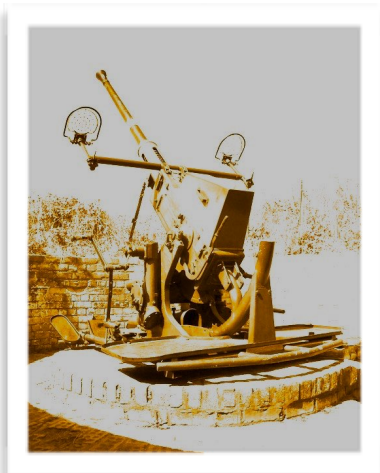
On the other hand there were at least a couple of upsides to the arrangement. Firstly, the relative success of *The Doppleganger* and the prospect of further sales let him feel able to marry his fiancé, Dorothy May Lange, an actress. The couple married on 21<sup>st</sup> August 1937 - in Jevington, near Eastbourne. And secondly, although he later disowned all four of these books (not because of their rather overt leftist sympathies - Innes' political views remained of the left although they're not so apparent in his later works), nor, as he explained to the author, Peter Tremayne: *'because they were particularly bad,'* but because he explained, *'mixed in with the main body of my work they would look a bit ham-fisted'*. The whole experience had been useful: *"I couldn't really complain, because writing those four books I more or less taught myself how to do it."*



On the back of the relative success of these early novels, Innes moved to another, more reputable, publisher (Collins), a publisher with a reputation for publishing quality fiction. His first four novels had given him confidence in his ability to write and to tap in to the extraordinary gift he had of creating gripping plot-lines. He produced three further adventure stories (he never liked to use the term 'thrillers' about his own books) for Collins over the next two years. Critical acclaim followed, as well as popularity in the country's libraries and bookshops. The third of these



stories, *Attack Alarm* (1941), was written largely during down time while defending RAF Kenley during the Battle of Britain. For Innes had joined the Royal Artillery in 1940.



*Attack Alarm* was published in America, after being serialised in an American newspaper - *The Saturday Evening Post*. Its powerful and sympathetic depiction of Britain at war is seen as having helped influence American public opinion at this critical moment in history.

From now on Innes' writing had an appreciative (and growing) audience on both sides of the Atlantic.

## War Years

The long days and nights spent defending a squadron of Spitfires in Surrey, which had provided him some time to write, came to an end. Innes' Royal Artillery unit moved on. For the next four years Innes served in North Africa with the Eighth Army and then in Italy. Writing fiction for most of this time had to be put on the back burner.

Towards the end of the War, however, Innes was invited to edit the Italian edition of the forces' paper in Italy, and, while doing so, began to shape up ideas for his next books.

In 1946, Innes, now a major, was demobbed. And he brought with him the manuscript of a fourth book for Collins which he had finished just prior to the War. 'Dead and Alive' (1946) dealt with the pre-war black market in Rome and Napoli.

During his final few months in the army he had been on a really tough skiing course in the Italian Dolomites. Of it, he said, "It was stiffer than any army course I



was on, including battle training.” But very significantly for Innes’ journey as a writer, the experience had provided him with both the background and authentic details (of skiing in difficult terrain amongst dramatic and inspiring landscapes) for another novel: *‘The Lonely Skier’* (1947).

## Fame in the 50’s and 60’s

This pattern of developing stories from personal experience continued.

His next book *‘Maddon’s Rock’* (1948) was based on a sailing adventure. It followed the crewing of a friend’s yacht in the Fastnet Race and it sold well.



*A yacht competing in the Fastnet Race*

In the same year he flew with an RAF crew carrying coal into Berlin. It was at the height of the Berlin Blockade (this was one of the first major crises of the Cold War, when rail, road and canal entry into West Berlin was blocked by the USSR and the only way to get supplies to its citizens was by air). This Airlift, as it is called, ran from June 1948 to May 1949 and its 200,000 or more deliveries of food and fuel successfully ensured that the Soviet Union would not have control of the whole of Berlin and removed the possibility of a unified Germany with the communist east in charge. He spent much of this time in R.A.F Gatow Airport in Berlin. Out of this experience he wrote *‘Air Bridge’* (1951).



*One of the first planes arriving in Berlin in 1948*

Having witnessed the seemingly endless arrival and departure, day and night, of planes at Tempelhof, he recognised that he had a kind of responsibility to his readers to

ensure that, although writing fiction, he should present ideas as realistically as possible. Innes decided that he would never start writing a book unless he had personally researched it - and that usually meant experiencing first hand the place and the background to the plot.

Part of the quality of an Innes story is that sense of accuracy and of truthfulness that comes from his rigorous approach. His novels - certainly from now on - were meticulously researched and describe activities, even events, that have been personally experienced by him. They ring true. And this sets them apart from most other writers in adventure or thriller genres.

In 1949 he was in San Sebastiano - a village that in 1944 had been destroyed by a massive eruption from Vesuvius. He witnessed a further major eruption when lava again flowed over the village. *'It was Pompeii over again. We knew what was going to happen, yet we felt no fear. It was all too vast.'* This resulted in the novel *The Angry Mountain* (1950)



*Vesuvius's partial eruption in 1948*

Again and again in his stories we are made to see the power of forces of nature and of man's attempts to stand up to them.

His research for *'The Blue Ice'* (1948), for example, involved him spending some months on a Norwegian whaling ship. This was at a time before whaling had become recognised as the brutal and unnecessary activity that we are aware of now. Innes engages with the thrill of the chase, the wildness of the sea and the weather, and the excitement and dangers of hunting such massive and powerful creatures. Significantly, however, Innes also recognised the cruelty of the activity and felt for the suffering of the magnificent creatures being hunted. After the experience he invested his own money into helping to research electronic devices that would cause less distress to the animals. The devices were not successful, however.



1952 saw the publication of his best-selling adventure story so far. Set in the Canadian Rocky Mountains it is called *Campbell's Kingdom*. Such was Innes' reputation by now that the film rights to the book were purchased even before the novel's publication. It was a coup for the British film-makers Rank. Released in 1957, it featured the rising star Dirk Bogarde (who had just made his name in the hugely successful *Doctor in the House*) as the story's hero, Bruce Campbell. The cast list reads like a roll-call of British cinema celebrities of the time - Stanley Baker, Michael Craig, Barbara Murray, James Robertson Justice and even Sid James.



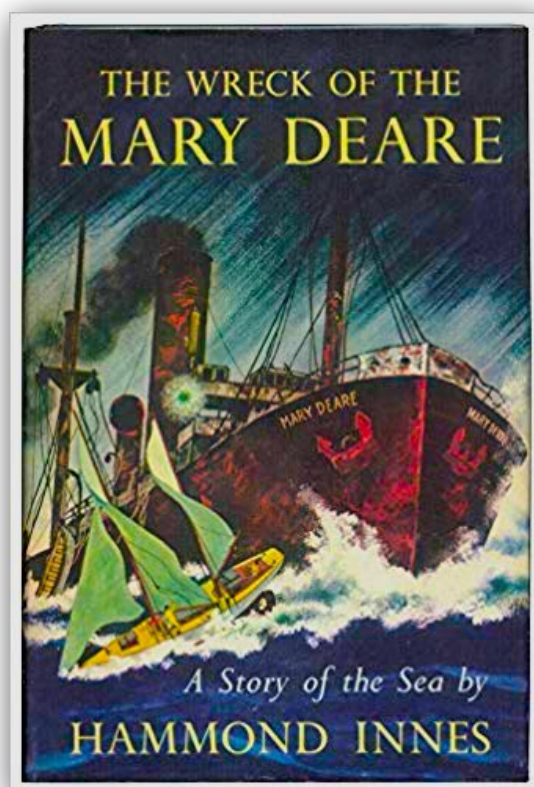
*Maglene Lake, Jasper National Park - in the heart of the Canadian Rockies*

So by the mid-1950's Innes had become one of Britain's most celebrated writers, extremely successful around the English-speaking world. Later, this success would extend to many other countries. His novels have been translated into over 30 languages. In 1954 he was taken on by a popular American travel magazine 'Holiday' whose editing team recognised Innes' awareness of people and places around the world and his ability to record what he saw. The publication both financed him and his wife and supported their travel around the world over the next few years in return for journalistic observations of wherever he went. The arrangement provided him with plenty of content for future books.

Then, in 1956, he published a book that was to seal his reputation as one of the greatest of all adventure-story writers. It was called *'The Wreck of the Mary Deare'* (1956).

Innes had always loved sailing - but had a near disaster when his boat was almost wrecked in the English Channel. This seems to have been the immediate

inspiration for the story. *The Wreck of the Mary Deare* is a novel which epitomises his skills as a writer - a pacy, dramatic story-line, with surprising twists and revelations



that give it a compelling can't-put-it-down structure, sharp characterisations, and descriptions of the forces of nature - most especially the power of weather and sea which here are quite breathtaking for the reader.

Picked up by MGM in Hollywood, it was made into a hugely successful film - full of the the big box-office stars of the day - Charlton Heston, Gary Cooper, Michael Redgrave, Richard Harris, and Emlyn Williams.

The money that poured in from both of these ventures made Innes a very wealthy man. It allowed him, for example, to purchase his own 42 foot ocean racing yacht which he called 'Mary Deare' and which replaced their earlier and far less special 'Triune of Troy'. He and Dorothy had bought a splendid medieval timbered house Ayres End in Kersey, Suffolk along with 233 acres of woodland). Dorothy also supported him in researching backgrounds for his books and, an author herself, described their journeys together in her book 'Occasions' (1972). She also wrote several plays.

### **Later Years as a Writer**

For the next fifteen or so years Innes (with Dorothy) spent half the year at home and half the year sailing abroad or travelling. He was a great believer in a writing routine - after an early breakfast and, perhaps, a walk around the garden (he and Dorothy created a really lovely garden at Ayres End) he would go to his study at 8.00 a.m. where he would write until lunchtime (around 1.00 p.m.) He took an afternoon 'siesta' - then would attend to his mail, telephone calls, fan mail and his diary. He would finish his working day at 6.00 p.m.





*Hammond and Dorothy Innes' home - Ayres End Kersey in Suffolk*

He also tried his hand at historical works: *The Conquistadores* in 1969 about the Spanish conquests of Mexico and Peru, and *The Last Voyage* (1978) a fictionalised account of Captain Cook's voyage based on an (imaginary) diary of Cook's recently discovered.

But the speed of his book production slowed down. From 1960 to the 1990's he produced 20 books

In 1996, Innes wrote his final novel *Delta Connection*. It is full of Innes' signature features - daring escapes, moments of cliffhanging danger, overpowering nature, a protagonist hero who takes on the world, a romance (here with a mysterious woman who we meet in Romania, and with whom our hero travels to the high mountains of Afghanistan).

### **Hammond Innes' Legacy**

By the time this book was published, Innes had managed to produce 44 books: 34 novels, 4 books for children (using the pen name Ralph Hammond)) and 6 non-fiction books - mainly travel, but also 'The Conquistadores'. He had also written many articles for 'Holiday' magazine and other periodicals.

Four of his books had been made into successful films: *Campbell's Kingdom*, *Hell Below Zero*, *Snowbound* and *The Wreck of the Mary Deare*.

During those fifteen or so years of travelling the world Innes' awareness of the environment and its significance to mankind had grown even more intense. As I've said already the wonder and power of nature appear in much of his writing and become an integral part of the narrative. But by the mid-1960's, and before it had become fashionable to do so, Innes had become what we might now call an 'environmentalist'. This awareness is there in much of his later writing - at times he becomes somewhat polemical. He developed a passion for tree planting - not only in the hundreds of acres that he owned in Suffolk, but also in huge tracts of land in both Canada and Australia. Perhaps Innes had an understanding of trees as 'the lungs of the planet' and the capturer of carbon, or perhaps he simply saw their life-enhancing significance in nature. Of his attitude to the way man's understanding of the world in which he lives has changed he said, "*As we have become more technological, we have lost a lot. There were things those early people understood that we don't.*"

In 1978 Innes was awarded the Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for his services to literature.

His wife, Dorothy Innes, died in 1989. Innes himself died (of cancer) nine years later on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1998, at his home in Ayres End. He was 84 years old. With no immediate members of his family to leave his estate to (he and Dorothy were childless), the greatest part of his fortune of nearly £ 7 million he left to *The Association of Sea Training Organisations*. He particularly wanted to provide young people, who might not be able to otherwise afford it, the opportunity to train and experience the joy and adventure of sailing. He had sailed (as purser) on one of their ocean-going yachts *The Winston Churchill* and he recognised the value to youngsters of the experience. He wishes to enable them, in his own, understated words, to '*take one step nearer to adulthood.*' Added to this large sum of money, he transferred the ownership of the copyright of his many books and films to the organisation. So - when you buy a Hammond Innes book, borrow one from your library, or even just watch one of his films, you're helping to support the work of ASTO!





*Written by Bryan Webster and produced by  
Horsham Writers Circle ([horshamwriters.co.uk](http://horshamwriters.co.uk))*



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