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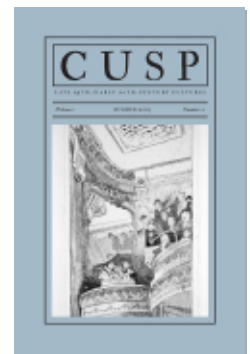
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Adam Parkes

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Erskine Childers and the Sense of Insecurity

Impressionism and Intelligence in The Riddle of the Sands

ADAM PARKES

Described by Fredric Jameson as a verbal record of sensation testifying to modernism's "will to style," literary impressionism is sometimes regarded as the language of a *de haut en bas* aestheticism.¹ On this view, impressionist writing holds itself apart from the more overtly contextualized narratives of realism and naturalism in order to repress history, especially political history. As I argued in my book *A Sense of Shock* (2011), that influential story strikes me as inadequate for various reasons. One reason, touched on only briefly there, has to do with how impressionist aesthetics infiltrated popular literary genres that emerged in the late nineteenth century and reshaped themselves in the twentieth: the detective story, the terrorist novel, the invasion novel, and the spy novel. This infiltration anticipates the later diffusion of impressionist effects across twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture elucidated by Jesse Matz in *Lasting Impressions* (2017). If we look at early spy fiction—or detective fiction, for that matter—we may see it already happening more than one hundred years ago. And in spy fiction, particularly, this process is inherently political in style, theme, and purpose.

Accounts of the spy novel's origins often look back to other popular genres that thrived in the Victorian period. According to David Glover, spy fiction is what happens when "imperial romance" divides into the detective story (concerned with domestic law and order) and the spy story (international crime and intrigue).² Alternatively, Thomas Rich-

ards has argued, spy fiction might be seen as emerging at the turn of the twentieth century from the invasion novels of William Le Queux and others to effect a “synthesis of the military and the police” that represents the new “space of national security.”³ But spy fiction is centrally preoccupied, too, with problems of seeing and representation that loom large in impressionist aesthetics. Glossed by Virginia Woolf’s Andrew Ramsay as having to do with “subject and object and the nature of reality,”⁴ these problems revolve around the evanescence and elusiveness of subjectivity, the instability of the field of objects, and the shifting ground of their mutual relations; a resistance to ingrained habits of perception and familiar modes of expression; and a tendency to loosen if not entirely dismantle systems of knowledge by substituting part for whole, vagueness for clarity, impression for fact. Exploring some of impressionism’s overlaps with the nascent genre of spy fiction, the present essay focuses on Erskine Childers’s thriller *The Riddle of the Sands: A Record of Secret Service* (1903) in order to ask what happens when a spy novel deploys impressionist techniques as means of investigating its own central preoccupations, its defining obsessions: intelligence, surveillance, and security.

Registering the shock precipitated by the collapse of inherited models of understanding and representation in the face of the unforeseen or unforeseeable, impressionism projects a sense of insecurity into the very realm of national security that is imagined and documented, as Richards argues, by spy fiction. That fictive space correlates to “new constructions of sense and perception [that] supplanted the solid positivities of geographical time and space” in a modern era that saw geography, once the discipline that “define[d] the parameters of positive military knowledge,” displaced by a “new magic epistemology” that increasingly “sought out the edges of enunciation where the normal and normative shaded into the paranormal and parapositive.”⁵ Indeed, the question of what counts as edge or margin becomes newly vexing as center and periphery shade into each other. In Childers, whose fusion of the police with the military Richards calls “archetypal,”⁶ the epistemological and representational assurances of cartography founder on the sands and sandbanks where the novel’s action—and long stretches of inaction—take place. *The Riddle*’s inclusion of actual maps and charts

of the German coastline suggests the limitations of the verbal medium, while the material reality of those same regions, with their baffling combinations of sea, sand, and weather, proves such visual guides to be equally unreliable—as Childers had discovered on his own maritime adventures.⁷ But with its explicitly political content and motive, signaled by a subtitle describing it in quasi-documentary terms as a “record of secret service,” *The Riddle* frames its exploration of formal and epistemological boundaries as anything but a matter of pure, disinterested aesthetics. As Daniel Brayton has suggested, “coastal indeterminacy” operates here as “a figure for the boundaries and frictions that separate and connect competing nation-states.”⁸ And it isn’t just those national (and imperial) borders that are at stake. So, too, are the means by which they are to be drawn and the vantage from which they are to be seen.

Britain’s literary sensation of 1903, the year that also saw the publication of Conrad’s *Typhoon and Other Stories* and James’s *The Ambassadors*, *The Riddle of the Sands* is one of the first and most enduringly popular examples of the spy genre. It’s a simple tale at heart. The narrator is a young Foreign Office official called Carruthers who, bored silly by London in summertime, answers the call of an Oxford acquaintance to join him on what is advertised as a sailing holiday around the German coast. The acquaintance, Davies, thinks he has discovered a spy; he wants to alert someone in the British government; Carruthers, who speaks German “like a native,” will do nicely (*RS*, 14). Sailing along Germany’s Baltic coast and then passing through the impressive new Kaiser Wilhelm Ship Canal into the North Sea, the two men uncover a plot to invade Britain. The element of surprise has to do with *how* and *where from*: lots of small vessels setting out from several small ports sheltering behind the Frisian Islands that line Germany’s narrow North Sea coast. As Davies puts it: “Tugs, launches, small yachts—anything would do at a pinch, for success would depend on intelligence, not on brute force or complicated mechanism” (111).

Variations on the figure of the amateur gentleman spy, who often appears in early British spy fiction,⁹ Carruthers and Davies are of course engaged in espionage against Germany, a hot topic in the spring of 1903 when the UK government started taking measures to guard against an invasion from the sea like that entertained in *The Riddle of*

the Sands.¹⁰ But what justifies their spying in Childers's novel, on top of patriotism, is their discovery of a traitor at the heart of the German plot, a former British naval officer called Dollmann. Once our resourceful young heroes have fathomed the invasion plan, they create some havoc and sail back to England with Dollmann's daughter, Clara, who has established herself (unconvincingly, it must be said) as the object of Davies's affections. Dollmann himself slips overboard rather than face the music, taking with him any hope of discovering the motive for his change of allegiance. That's the insoluble riddle beneath the riddle of the sands of the German coast.

The riddle, together with the puzzle and the web, is part of a cluster of metaphors within the novel that fosters a sense of enigma—a crucial effect of early spy fiction, as noted by David Trotter,¹¹ and one that links Childers's tale with *Heart of Darkness*. Childers shares Conrad's preoccupation with questions of perception and interpretation: How does one see? What does seeing mean? How does one make others see, and what does that mean? Exercised as Conrad was by how answers (or non-answers) to such questions may whittle away epistemological, political, and moral certainties, Childers starts working out the key imperatives of the emergent spy genre—and, more broadly, the fictive possibilities of enigma—by mining some of the formal and stylistic resources of literary impressionism. These include alternately sharp and blurred visualization; non-linear, embedded, and discontinuous narration; a mixture of written and oral accounts; multi-textuality (illustrations serve critical functions); and self-conscious narrative framing.

The Riddle opens with a preface dated March 1903 and signed with Childers's own initials, E. C. This author writes that he heard the tale from "my friend 'Carruthers'" in October the previous year; while the story "made a very deep impression," the exact dates of the events recounted there remain unclear (*RS*, 3). Observing that publication of the tale was essential for the sake of "national security," E. C. adds that it was agreed he should "edit" the book, using Carruthers's diary (extracts from which alternate between present-tense notes on conditions at sea and past-tense narration of events) together with Davies's maps and charts to supplement the detailed oral reports of both men (3, 4). Written "as from the mouth of the former" (4), the complete narra-

tive also features written accounts by Davies: the letter that initiates the action in chapter 1 (titled “The Letter”) and extracts from his maritime logbook. The close of the narrative is followed by an epilogue and a postscript; in the second of these, E. C. remarks that while the book was in press the British government began taking steps to address the dangers dramatized in Carruthers’s tale, as was indeed the case, but regrets that it will take ten years to get the newly-chosen site for a naval base on the Firth ready for action. As fiction and reality weave in and around each other, the narrative framing of Childers’s text contributes to the production of enigma. “The mind,” as Woolf wrote in *The Waves* (1931), “grows rings.”¹²

Some of *The Riddle*’s formal elements have been discussed by Michael Fried, who hails the novel as “a brilliantly creative contribution to the impressionist project.”¹³ But Fried, while recruiting Childers’s spy novel into the impressionist camp, does not ask what impressionism does for spy fiction and, in particular, for spy fiction as an inherently political genre. In spy fiction, reading texts and following maps and charts—and discovering their limitations in the shifting liminal spaces of a coastline—are not abstract aesthetic activities. They occur in political contexts and have explicitly political consequences. To elucidate the geopolitical import of parsing various texts was precisely Childers’s aim in writing the novel, as it was John Buchan’s twelve years later in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915). Their books are not just *about* personal and national awakening; they are meant to wake up their readers to an already-present threat. “Wake up!” (*RS*, 36) Davies barks at Carruthers the morning after the latter’s first night on his yacht, a poor old thing fondly named *Dulcibella*.¹⁴ In Childers, as in Buchan, opening one’s eyes (or making the reader see) is a matter of national security.

Or *insecurity*. What, after all, does national security mean? Like Conrad, and also like Buchan in certain ways, Childers fosters a sense of insecurity in the very geopolitical entity—the imperial nation-state—around which the spy novel is built and whose interests such fiction often seems meant to serve. What are the state’s borders? What is its core, its essence—or is there no such thing? And how to define, precisely, the political identities that the nation-state ostensibly sponsors? How to name them?

Such questions are thrown into sharp relief by the story of Childers's remarkable life.¹⁵ Born in London to an Anglo-Irish family in 1870, Childers served with the British forces in the Boer War, where he was attached to an artillery unit, and again in World War I, his activities in that case including aerial reconnaissance for the Royal Navy. Growing sympathy for Irish Home Rule, however, led Childers to staunch Republicanism, rejection of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, and finally, in November 1922, execution by the forces of the Free State. It may be tempting to treat Childers's biography teleologically as somehow answering the riddle of his novel—that is, as the key that unlocks the obscure motives of an ex-British naval officer (and the author of a yachting guide whose frontispiece gives away his identity) now working for the Germans.¹⁶ But there's no need to read the author's life backwards in order to imagine how or why he started teasing out the questions that will circulate about Dollmann. The Boer War is one possible source. Another is Childers's reading, which during his own tour along the German coast in 1897 included Thackeray's *The History of Henry Esmond* (1852), an historical novel about an Anglo-Irish family from the Battle of the Boyne to the death of Queen Anne that explores themes of illegitimacy, disinheritance, and divided loyalty.¹⁷

The Riddle of the Sands offers its own clues to the riddle of political identity, including the names contrived for the chief players by an author/editor who supposedly withholds their real ones to protect national security and personal reputations. These names illustrate quite pointedly Childers's sense of the difficulty of fixing national borders and identities. The two English patriots are given aliases deriving from Britain's Celtic fringe: "Davies" is Welsh, plainly, while "Carruthers" originates in the Scottish borderlands. As for the third major English figure, the traitor Dollmann, his name "evokes a doll manipulated by distant interests," as Richards has pointed out.¹⁸ But suggesting also the figure of the hollow man, the name is shot through with Conradian inscrutability. Obviously Anglo-German, its associations scarcely cohere into a clear single meaning. *Doll*, a regional variation of the High German *Toll*, suggests "great" or "mad, delusional."¹⁹ While *dolman*, meaning a "long robe open in front, with narrow sleeves, worn by the Turks" (*OED*), feels unlikely, there may be a pun on *dolmen*, a

French word for *cromlech*, or prehistoric stone monument, hinting at some form of identity that antedates the historical frameworks of nation and empire. Dating as far back as the Neolithic period, dolmens are often found in Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, and Devon—the Celtic fringe, again, of the British Isles.²⁰ While suggestive in various ways, however, these possibilities gesture towards some general idea about the inherent vagueness of national identities rather than a particular secret waiting to be decoded.

Thickening these opacities, Childers's impressionist style deepens the sense of insecurity—epistemological, psychological, political—lurking everywhere in his narrative. As a result, it's impossible to see into Dollmann. Readers barely see anything of him at all, in fact. The narrator takes merely a few surface impressions, whose fluctuations thwart any narratorial or readerly desire for a clear, stable image. At one moment, Dollmann leaves a "lightning impression of a grey beard and a steep tanned forehead, behind a cloud of cigar smoke" (*RS*, 174); later, a side-light reveals a "livid smiling mask" that stamps Carruthers's mind with an ineffaceable "impression of malignant perfidy and base passion, exaggerated to caricature" (200); and then, "seen in a normal light," his appearance is "a pleasant surprise, the remarkable conformation of the head giving an impression of intellectual power and restless, almost insanely restless, energy" (208). As they modulate, these impressions hint at depth but never yield certainty. Roy Foster has described Dollmann simply as "the epitome of corruption,"²¹ but E.C.'s narrative is somewhat less forthcoming than such a judgment implies. As in the case of Conrad's Kurtz, the mystery seems to be the point.²²

Hence the significance of fog in *The Riddle of the Sands*. It is not there simply to create atmosphere in the manner to which the Impressionist painters (as Nicholas Freeman emphasizes) had already made art viewers accustomed.²³ A repeated presence throughout the narrative, as in the logs Childers kept on his own voyages, the fog is real. In this realist or (as Freeman calls it) empiricist sense, it has several functions that serve the purposes of the spy plot.²⁴ Often it obscures what needs to be seen. It makes navigation difficult and sometimes dangerous, of course, raising the premium on a mariner's powers of intuition and improvisation. Paradoxically, while narrowing the observer's visual

field, fog may expand the sense of space to the point where it dissolves the illusions of unclouded perception and rational control conferred by maps and charts—an effect that seems especially consequential in the context of imperial rivalry and suspicion that obtains here. At other times in Childers’s novel, fog is employed as a screen, notably in the long central episode when Carruthers and Davies undertake a rowing expedition of heroic proportions from Nordeney to Memmert (which takes more than four hours) and then back to Nordeney (over three more hours). The purpose of that taxing journey is espionage (see Figure 1).

Fog, then, is used tactically to further the art of spying. Like ebbing tides and dead calm, it also slows down the plot, creating a sense of variable time-scale and a correlative dissonance between the planes of intellection and physical action. The results may entail a variety of mental states including tedium, slumber, confusion, distraction, and suspense, the last of which, in particular, is central to the experience of reading spy fiction.²⁵ Accordingly, in the rowing episode, Childers employs the fog to heighten the suspense for his characters and for his

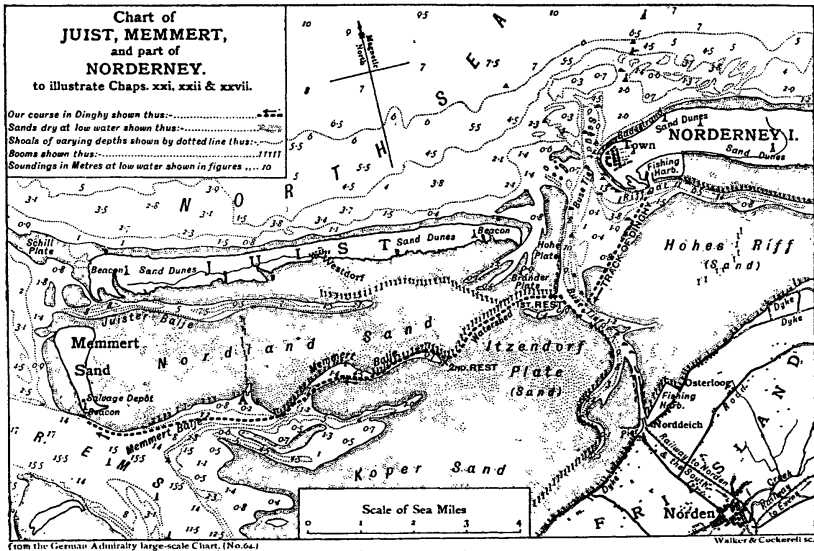


Figure 1.

readers. This *is* fog as atmosphere, then, but only insofar as it fits the requirements of the spy plot. At the same time, fog has metaphorical associations linking it both with mental states, including confusion and disorientation, that envelop the protagonists and with the “cloud of cigar smoke” that obscures Carruthers’s first impression of Dollmann’s face (*RS*, 174). That is a fog that never lifts.

As well as a shifting object of uncertain perception, Childers’s fog serves as a metaphor for eye, mind’s eye, and mind itself. In *The Riddle of the Sands*, fog evokes difficulties of vision and understanding; it represents a challenge to intelligence—that is, the spy’s detection and collection of evidence, and the conversion of that information into knowledge. These difficulties are not entertained as intellectual abstractions. Rather, Childers modulates the narrator’s language, inviting readers to reframe and deepen their view of Carruthers himself. In fact, as he ventriloquizes Carruthers, E.C. draws attention to his stylistic differences from Davies, whose “stammering sentences,” “forcible roughnesses,” and “sudden bursts of ardour” require translation into lucid elegant prose (*RS*, 91, 77). Davies, ever the modest Englishman, also encourages this view. The resulting stylistic variety produces another kind of fog through which the novel’s readers—tacitly figured as secret agents in a nautical spy plot—must find their way.

Davies’s contribution to this stylistic fog takes written and oral forms; the first divides into the epistolary and the documentary. Reproducing the letter that sets the plot in motion, E.C. has Carruthers comment on the content and style of what seem to be its most salient points or, rather, omissions:

I pulled out the letter again, and ran down its impulsive staccato sentences, affecting to ignore what a gust of fresh air, high spirits, and good fellowship this flimsy bit of paper wafted into the jaded club-room. On reperusal, it was full of evil presage—“A1 scenery”—but what of equinoctial storms and October fogs? Every sane yachtsman was paying off his crew now. “There ought to be duck”—vague, very vague. “If it gets cold enough” . . . cold and yachting seemed to be a gratuitously monstrous union. His pals had left him; why? “Not the ‘yachting’ brand”; and why not? As to the size, comfort, and crew of the yacht—all cheerfully ignored; so many maddening blanks. And, by the way, why in Heaven’s name “a prismatic compass”? (*RS*, 16)

As Carruthers reads between the lines, the commentary on style is inseparable from that on content; style *is* content. The indirection, vagueness, and blanks detected in his correspondent's "impulsive staccato sentences" fashion some of the most recognizable marks of impressionist style as elliptical clues to the presence of an unplumbed mystery. Indicating a rift between appearance and reality, and encouraging readers to adjust their expectations, an ostensible invitation to join a holiday cruise yields the novel's first intimation of what turns out to be a spy plot.

Evincing some of the same stylistic characteristics as his letter, excerpts from Davies's logbook seem nevertheless to be written in a more direct, informational manner appropriate to that form. Childers typically employed this very manner in his own logbooks. "Thick fog and dead calm," he wrote while stalled in the southern Baltic on October 19, 1897:

A day to be hurried over. Calm, rain, fog, polings close inshore, towings in dinghy, all under a universal grey blur. Towed blindly in the evening into an inlet on the north shore, only 8 miles or so from starting point, and turned in after a chat with some friendly fisher folk, from a smack near, who gave me a bucketfull of fish. (*TS*, 89)

Pulling Davies's logbook from his "untidy" bookshelf, Carruthers relates that:

It was a mass of short entries, with cryptic abbreviations, winds, tides, weather, and courses appearing to predominate. The voyage from Dover to Ostend was dismissed in two lines: "Under way 7 p.m., wind WSW moderate; West Hinder 5 a.m., outside all banks; Ostend 11 a.m." The Scheldt had a couple of pages very technical and staccato in style. Inland Holland was given a contemptuous summary, with some half-hearted allusions to windmills, and so on, and a caustic word or two about boys, paint, and canal smells. (*RS*, 47)

Incident seems merely incidental, the mark of the everyday, extraneous to plot and plotting—the sign of plotlessness itself, perhaps. Barely a sketch, this sort of writing limns the indeterminate space between fact

and impression or, rather, the space where fact and impression meet and merge.

Opening out into such indeterminacy, Davies's logbook sometimes expands its overtly informational remit to give indirect expression to changes of writerly feeling. Carruthers glosses what ensues in just this fashion: "At Amsterdam technicalities began again, and a brisker tone pervaded the entries, which became progressively fuller as the writer cruised on the Frisian coast. He was clearly in better spirits, for here and there were quaint and laboured efforts to describe nature . . . with an occasional note of a visit on shore, generally reached by a walk of half a mile over sand, and of talks with shop people and fishermen" (*RS*, 47). Even so, Carruthers adds, "such lighter relief was rare": "The bulk dealt with channels and shoals with weird and depressing names, with the centre-plate, the sails, and the wind, buoys and 'booms', tides and 'berths' for the night. 'Kedging off' appeared to be a frequent diversion; 'running aground' was of almost daily occurrence" (47). "It was not easy reading," Carruthers remarks, "and I turned the leaves rapidly," as if inviting his own audience to do the same (47).

However far removed from the exigencies of a spy plot such passages may appear, they demand careful attention; if a reader does turn the pages quickly, it must be with heightened attention not only to what is said but also to what is not said. The point impresses itself on Carruthers when he comes to a place in Davies's log "where the rain of little sentences, pattering out like small shot, ceased abruptly" (*RS*, 47–48). For three September days Davies had gone silent, resuming the next day with a "recital of naked facts" that would have gone unremarked if Carruthers had not "noticed that a page had been torn out of the book just at this point" (48). Ellipsis, a common textual feature of both literary impressionism and spy fiction, is realized here in the form of a missing page. The results are immediate. Recognizing that the allegedly candid Davies cannot be relied on to tell the whole truth, and marking him down as a "tiresome enigma" (53), Carruthers resolves to keep his own diary, which he later excerpts to ensure that "the reader should be wholly with us in our point of view" during his account of another three-day period (120). But Carruthers also pays close attention in the next chapter ("The Missing Page") when Davies describes

what happened to him the day before his three-day silence and, in doing so, fills in the gap in his log. In sentences that Carruthers has “straightened out a little” on the grounds that “in the excitement of his story they had grown more and more jerky and elliptical” (67), Davies relates how Dollmann tried to drown him by running him aground while pretending to help him navigate the coastal waterways during a bad storm. Despite editorial straightening, much remains “elliptical” here, not least the reason Davies removed the pertinent page from his logbook. At this very juncture, however, the novel speaks its own name, as Davies discloses his conviction that “*that chap was a spy*” (68).

The effect of this utterance is to reframe Davies’s letter, which had been written at that very time, and to recast Carruthers’s reading, which had been alert to vagueness and blanks but blind to the author’s intended meaning. That blindness seems perfectly understandable: unless already acquainted with *The Riddle*’s reputation as a spy novel, the vast majority of Childers’s readers are likely to be in the same boat as Carruthers, and even those in the know are unlikely to decode Davies’s missive any more effectively than he does. With most (perhaps all) of his readers in tow, then, Carruthers is compelled to revisit the scene of what is now exposed as a signally inadequate reading:

In the end it came out quite quietly and suddenly, and left me in profound amazement. “I wired to you—that chap was a spy.” It was the close association of these two ideas that hit me hardest at the moment. For a second I was back in the dreary splendour of the London club-room, spelling out that crabbed scrawl from Davies, and fastidiously criticizing its proposal in the light of a holiday. Holiday! What was to be its issue? Chilling and opaque as the fog that filtered through the skylight there flooded my imagination a mist of doubt and fear. (*RS*, 68)

Calling Dollmann a spy explains neither the exact nature his espionage nor its strategic purpose, let alone his personal motive. As Carruthers flounders in befuddlement and Davies equivocates over his choice of words, the novel articulates some sense its own generic ambiguity:

“A spy!” I repeated blankly. “What do you mean? Why did you wire to me? A spy of what—of whom?”

“I’ll tell you how I worked it out,” said Davies. “I don’t think ‘spy’ is the right word; but I mean something pretty bad.” (68)

“Chilling and opaque” as the fog filtering through the skylight and the metaphorical “mist of doubt and fear” flooding the narrator’s imagination, the locutionary and interpretative uncertainties manifested by this episode highlight the veiled mingling of literary genres—adventure tale, detective fiction, and invasion fiction—with the modes of realism and impressionism from which Childers’s singular version of the spy novel emerges.

The impressionist element of *The Riddle*’s narrative operations remains crucial. Just as Childers’s protagonists have to keep moving, mentally as well as physically, so too the reader must adjust to the absence of stable frameworks of understanding. Having shared his suspicions about Dollmann, Davies outlines his initial theory of what lies behind the attempt on his life (the relevant chapter is aptly titled “The Theory”). While he is eventually proved right that something is afoot in the channels riddling Germany’s coastal region—“In the event of war it seems to me that every inch of it would be important, *sand and all*” (RS, 76)—he mistakenly assumes that the Germans are concerned with defensive strategy. That error is impossible to detect as yet, but Carruthers quickly pokes a pair of holes in Davies’s theory: “First, you’ve never explained why an *Englishman* should be watching those waters and ejecting intruders; secondly, your theory doesn’t supply sufficient motive” (78). Davies, then, has identified a starting-point but no more; Childers’s self-made secret agents must remain in motion, gathering intelligence as they can and adjusting each deduction in the light of subsequent discoveries.

It should be clear by now that intelligence here denotes neither a reliable repository of facts nor some ready-made rational faculty for commanding them but, rather, an unstable, ever-changing assemblage of partial evidence, shards of fact, soundings, re-soundings, that make constant demands on the observer’s powers of assimilation and adaptation. Having corrected and annotated their maps and charts, Carruthers and Davies realize that these documents coupled with the latter’s logbook—“damning clues to our purpose” (RS, 125)—may

compromise their safety. When their efforts at concealment fail, they adapt again, inferring that signs of discovery—“‘Logbook’s shifted,’ said Davies” (202)—may be evidence that their enemy is onto them. Another casualty of this process of continual adjustment is the attempt to fathom Dollmann’s motive. While that motive may matter to readers interested in reflecting on the relationship between personal and national-imperial allegiances, it does not matter in the end to the security imperatives driving the spy plot: the discovery of German invasion plans. It seems all the more paradoxical, then, that Childers takes such pains (as I noted earlier) to elicit curiosity about Dollmann by employing impressionist strategies of vagueness that thicken the haze of mystery and suspense surrounding this forbiddingly enigmatic figure. But that may be the point. Appearing in many ways to cooperate with the demands of the spy plot, in other ways Childers’s impressionism blurs the novel’s focus on espionage and national rivalry, allowing a reader’s mind’s eye to drift over to the puzzle of a self that refuses to align with any normative modern political identity.

Childers’s impressionism is scarcely limited to strategies for engendering narrative instability and indeterminacy. It inheres, as noted earlier, in his novel’s metaphorical patterns and in the stylistic variety already evident in excerpts from Davies’s logbook. Style itself is a network of shifting sandbanks in *The Riddle of the Sands*. At times, it may seem to offer safe passage to a credible understanding of things if not men (and certainly not women). At others, it may suggest some sense of personal sincerity: what else do Davies’s “forcible roughnesses” and “sudden bursts of ardour” signify if not a very Victorian earnestness (*RS*, 77)? Yet, although Davies does indeed prove a brick, his removal of a tell-tale page from his log shows that he’s not above doctoring the written record—a sleight of hand that readers may or may not wish to reconcile to ideas of patriotic duty or respect for reputations. But navigating *The Riddle* means navigating indeterminacies of language, as well as those of plot and character, and requires constant alertness to corresponding changes not merely in point of view but in perceptual mode.

Independent of Davies’s written and spoken incursions, the language of Carruthers’s narration—as shaped by his editor—is itself sub-

ject to change. Occurring at key moments in the tale, these modulations express changes in Carruthers's own habits of perception, with significant implications for the spy plot or, as I have been arguing, for the relationship between impressionist aesthetics and intelligence. Managing point of view is Carruthers's explicit ambition when he switches from narrative mode to diary form in chapter 15: "The decisive incidents of our cruise were now fast approaching," he writes. "Looking back on the steps that led to them, and anxious that the reader should be wholly with us in our point of view, I think I cannot do better than give extracts from my diary of the next three days" (*RS*, 120). The reason for managing point of view, then, is the importance of managing point of view. And so for the next half-dozen pages Carruthers presents his account of the events of October 16–18 as a series of diary entries, before signaling his resumption of "narrative form" at the start of the next chapter (126). As a strategy for claiming narrative authority, the objective appears clear enough, but readers sensitive to previous changes of point of view will be on the lookout for alternative evidence and may, as a result, reserve judgment not only on the case but even on Carruthers himself.

After an opening salvo that finds him bored and depressed in the imperial metropolis, Carruthers hardly presents himself as a stable, fully-formed entity. Just as the figures of Davies and Dollmann change shape during the narrative, so does that of the narrator. And these shifts manifest themselves in his language, precipitating adjustments of perceptual mode. Most important among these is Carruthers's own gradual transformation from a self-described "peevish dandy" into a secret agent (*RS*, 86). This change of character expresses itself by a change of style: from a picturesque impressionism content with describing the pleasing effects of landscape and maritime haze to an alert observational mode.

Given Carruthers's skepticism on boarding the *Dulcibella*, to which he brings a "jaundiced eye" (*RS*, 25), the modulation into a language of picturesque appreciation is striking enough. Narrating their movement along a fjord toward the Baltic, Carruthers recalls:

Behind us, Flensburg was settling into haze. Ahead, the scene was shut in by the contours of hills, some clear, some dreamy and distant. Lastly, a single glimpse of water shining between the folds of hill far away hinted at spaces of distant sea of which this was but a secluded inlet. Everywhere was that peculiar charm engendered by the association of quiet pastoral country and a homely atmosphere with a branch of the great ocean that bathes all the shores of our globe. (31)

As in Davies's log, there are correspondences here with the log Childers kept on his own voyages, but in this case it's not the author's matter-of-factness that reappears but his tendency to lyrical description. Childers's entry for October 18, 1897 begins: "Sailed at 12 in light S wind northwards for Flensburg Fiord. Another calm lovely day, but very hazy. . . . On the far side (it is about 2 miles broad) are gentle brown cliffs splendidly wooded, varied by pastures sloping to the water's edge; inland, soft curves of hills and rich pastoral land" (*TS*, 88–89). Drawing on his logbook for the corresponding passage in *The Riddle*, Childers sends up the very same signal about the pastoral mode.

Yet even when Childers's logbook is at its most picturesque, it indicates that a different perspective and language may be required. "Very hazy but fine," he wrote on October 10. "Beat in a light wind up Kiel Fiord. Nothing visible, till suddenly mists rolled away and showed a noble fiord, edged with tree-clad, villa-dotted hills, deep blue tideless waters all a-ripple and a-dazzle in the sun, and a long line of battleships moored in the fairway to where the town lay sparkling and glistening after the rain" (*TS*, 87). The picture may present a "marvellous and magical contrast to the grey expanses of the North Sea, and the lonely levels of Friesland" (87), but those battleships hint at another story. Similarly, in *The Riddle*, Carruthers seems to allow that a different frame of reference may be possible and even necessary. As if aware of how his language, at once domesticating and imperializing, verges on the touristic, the narrator-hero suggests that his way of seeing derives from something other than the leisured eye's view:

There was another charm in the scene, due to the way in which I was viewing it—not as a pampered passenger on a "fine steam yacht", or even on "a powerful modern schooner", as the yacht agents advertise,

but from the deck of a scrubby little craft of doubtful build and distressing plainness, which yet had smelt her persistent way to this distant fiord through I knew not what of difficulty and danger, with no apparent motive in her single occupant, who talked as vaguely and unconcernedly about his adventurous cruise as though it were all a protracted afternoon on Southampton Water. (31)

In this skillfully protracted sentence, Carruthers is rationalizing, obviously, as he does not yet know the real reason Davies has brought him out. But something else is expressed, too: a sense of flux, of shifting viewpoint, openness to change. Although he does not know it yet, lives will depend on this openness, including his own. “I knew not what of difficulty and danger”: personal and national security are predicated on willingness and ability to allow for the insecurity of established frameworks of perception and understanding, and indeed for the ongoing insecurity of any new frameworks that replace their predecessors. No security, in other words, without a sense of insecurity.

Attesting a desire for security to which spy fiction is particularly attuned, Carruthers’s old habits—perceptual, stylistic, and ideological—die hard. Hence his persistence in the early sea-going chapters with a picturesque travel-writing mode that reinforces distinctions between the narrator’s aesthetic self and his shipmate’s matter-of-fact practicality. When Davies points “vaguely at a blur of trees and cliff” (*RS*, 36), he’s thinking about a place to drop anchor, whereas for Carruthers the rounding of another bend in the fjord “disclosed new beauties,” prompting him to “doze away the afternoon, drenching brain and body in the sweet and novel foreign atmosphere, and dreamily watching the fringe of glen cliff and cool white sand as they passed ever more slowly by” (35–36). But once Carruthers gets used to life at sea, immersing himself in practical tasks with a degree of concentration that banishes the distractions of metropolitan modernity, his “sensations” become “vastly livelier” (44). When he recalls how “sensuous perception was deadened by nervousness” (44), it’s plain that a new sense of exigency is rebooting his perceptual system. The reader is put on alert, as Carruthers, making “no apology” for describing the early going in laborious detail, reports that “every trifle, sordid or picturesque, was

relevant; every scrap of talk a link; every passing mood critical for good or ill" (50). From this point, he declares, "I had no eyes for beauty" (51).

Saying goodbye to picturesque aestheticism, Carruthers moves out of pastoral nostalgia into a way of thinking and writing more proximate to the realm of political paranoia inhabited by actors in a spy story. Davies is already there, even if Carruthers is slow to spot it. On re-reading, it's possible to infer that when Carruthers sees Davies looking "dreamy" (*RS*, 51), he is probably thinking about Clara Dollmann, whose presence (like her father's) is still to be disclosed, and whose name (unlike his) evokes an as-yet-unavailable clarity. But Davies's romantic fancy turns out to be inseparable from his alertness to the demands of the spy plot, so that thinking of Clara may be just another way of calculating their next move. For Davies, removing the *in* from insecurity has a double motive, and the pursuit of personal happiness (which means repatriating the Anglo-German Clara) is inextricable from spying for his country.

Carruthers's descriptive style is palpably transformed by his encounter with the Kaiser Wilhelm Canal. Arriving at the entrance to the canal in October 1897, just two years after its opening, Childers himself had been struck by the fanfare, sophistication, and sheer scale of this powerful statement of imperial intent.²⁶ Similarly, when Carruthers arrives there, the sight of the canal and its embankments douses him in the simultaneously awesome and ominous signs of German industrialization, militarism, and burgeoning imperialism:

The soft scenery of the Schleswig coast was a baseless dream of the past, and a cold penetrating rain added the last touch of dramatic completeness to the staging of the new act.

For two days we travelled slowly up the mighty waterway that is the strategic link between the two seas of Germany. Broad and straight, massively embanked, lit by electricity at night till it is lighter than many a great London street; traversed by great war vessels, rich merchantmen, and humble coasters alike, it is a symbol of the new and mighty force which, controlled by the genius of statesmen and engineers, is thrusting the empire irresistibly forward to the goal of maritime greatness. (*RS*, 87)

Transpiring in the space between paragraphs and signposted by Carruthers himself, the change in register is unmistakable, as the narrator's eyes adjust from "soft scenery" to this vivid and entirely unexpected evidence—hardened already into a "symbol"—of Germany's power and potential. It transmits a shock not only to Carruthers but also, by extension, to Britain, threatened now by a new rival's "dream of a colonial empire": "our great trade rival of the present, our great naval rival of the future, . . . grows, and strengthens, and waits, an ever more formidable factor in the future of our delicate network of empire, sensitive as gossamer to external shocks, and radiating from an island whose commerce is its life, and which depends even for its daily ration of bread on the free passage of the seas" (90).

The language of delicacy here adorns a tale to point a political moral, but in expressing the previously unsuspected vulnerability of the British empire, Carruthers's words announce that the time for aesthetic self-appreciation has gone. Indeed, these sentences indicate that a realignment of imperial relations is already precipitating a larger conceptual shift from one dimension to another: that is, from the spatial geography of an empire whose supposedly self-evident rightness sponsors an aesthetic of timelessness to the insistent temporality of a new insurgent imperialism that threatens to displace the aesthetics of space by occupying both the present and the future. This conceptual crisis underscores the emphatically political nature of the modulations in Childers's prose from the flat optics of his narrator's "jaundiced eye" (25) through picturesque appreciation of "soft scenery" (87) to sharp apprehension of modernity on a war footing—on a perpetual war footing, moreover, because even peacetime is saturated with information that might be interpreted as prophesying war. The future tense projected by spy fiction as an engine of suspense merges with the "tense future" described in Paul St. Amour's account of interwar modernist epics that confront the ceaseless threat of total war.²⁷

Drawing attention to the political undertones of Childers's language scarcely settles questions about the novel's political allegiances or impact. Instead, approaching *The Riddle* with appreciation of how it mobilizes impressionist ways of seeing might alert readers to the shifting sands of aesthetic practice, of political allegiance, and of relations

between the aesthetic and the political. A well-known riddle in themselves, as I remarked earlier, the author's own politics would prove more complicated than his novel seems to let on when treated solely as a warning about Germany. Recalling those turns in Childers's complex career, Nicholas Allen has recently argued that the novel's charting of sea and coast offers a "response to the imperial idea of the sea as a symbol of British superiority" that anticipates his anti-British turn.²⁸ That's one intriguing way of recasting Childers's remarkable spy story. But however a reader parses the author's politics at the time of composition, *The Riddle of the Sands* establishes terms on which the arts of spying and of writing spy fiction would absorb and reframe the lessons of impressionist aesthetics—and it does so in ways that translate directly, inescapably, and yet elusively into a political realm.

NOTES

- 1 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 208.
- 2 David Glover, "Super-Niches? Detection, Adventure, Exploration, and Spy Stories," *Late Victorian into Modern*, ed. Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn, and Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 232–45.
- 3 Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 124, 141.
- 4 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981), 23.
- 5 Richards, *The Imperial Archive*, 142.
- 6 Richards, *The Imperial Archive*, 123.
- 7 Sailing around the Frisian Islands with his brother Henry, Childers recorded in his log for September 17, 1897 that "our charts of all these waters, though the latest Admiralty editions, were altogether unreliable for the minor channels and swatchways." See Hugh Popham and Robin Popham, ed., *A Thirst for the Sea: The Sailing Adventures of Erskine Childers* (London: Sanford Maritime, 1979), 77; hereafter, *TS*.
- 8 Daniel Brayton, "The Riddle of the Sands: Erskine Childers between the Tides," *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge*, ed. Nicholas Allen, Nick Groome, and Jos Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 122.
- 9 Pre-eminent among the amateur spies of early spy fiction was John Buchan's Richard Hannay. Others included William Le Queux's Duckworth Drew and the dramatis personae of the numerous works of E. Phillips Oppenheim. On Le Queux, see David Stafford, *The Silent Game: The Real World of Imaginary Spies*

- (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 7–10; on Oppenheim, see David Trotter, “The Politics of Adventure in the Early British Spy Novel,” *Spy Fiction, Spy Films and Real Intelligence*, ed. Wesley K. Wark (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 42–46.
- 10 Childers’s biographer Andrew Boyle perhaps overstates the case when claiming that, “For the next ten years Childers’s book remained the most powerful contribution of any English writer to the debates on Britain’s alleged military unpreparedness”; *The Riddle of Erskine Childers* (London: Hutchinson, 1977), 111. But as Boyle records (112–14), *The Riddle* did attract the attention of the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John Fisher, and other eminences including the young Winston Churchill. See also Leonard Piper, *Dangerous Waters: The Life and Death of Erskine Childers* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), 75–77.
 - 11 Trotter, “The Politics of Adventure,” 42.
 - 12 Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), 257.
 - 13 Michael Fried, *What Was Literary Impressionism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 211.
 - 14 Childers named the boat “in honour of his favourite sister”; Piper, *Dangerous Waters*, 67.
 - 15 This story has been told several times. Piper’s and Boyle’s accounts have proved very useful, as has Jim Ring, *Erskine Childers* (London: John Murray, 1996).
 - 16 Roy Foster, for example, describes Dollmann’s case as “oddly prophetic” of the author’s own; “A Patriot for Whom? Erskine Childers, A Very English Irishman,” *History Today* 38, no. 10 (October 1988): 32. In an ingenious reading, Brayton develops the parallels between Dollmann and his creator, proposing that: “Hindsight lets us view the young Childers who penned *The Riddle of the Sands* as a man of divided roles, part Davies the pragmatic sailor, part Carruthers the man of politics, and part Dollmann the turncoat mariner with obscure motives”; Brayton, “*The Riddle of the Sands*,” 127. The key word here may be “hindsight.”
 - 17 Childers’s log shows him reading *Esmond* in late September and early October (*TS*, 81–83). By late November he is onto *Pendennis* (1848–50) and then, in early December, Stevenson’s *St. Ives* (posthumously published in 1897 and completed in 1898 by Arthur Quiller-Couch), followed a week later by Cook’s *Voyages* and book VI of the *Aeneid* (*TS*, 95, 101, 104).
 - 18 Richards, *The Imperial Archive*, 137.
 - 19 *Concise Oxford–Duden German Dictionary*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael Clark and Olaf Thyen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
 - 20 I am grateful to an off-screen participant in the First Impressions Symposium at the University of Bristol, which I attended virtually, for drawing my attention to the echo of *dolmen* in Dollmann.
 - 21 Foster, “A Patriot for Whom?” 32.
 - 22 In the *The Riddle of the Sands*, moreover, trying to solve such questions as, “Who are ‘they’? Who are our adversaries?” (*RS*, 83), by fingering Dollmann hardly dispels the mystery of what it means here to be adversarial, or of what it means to be theirs not ours. Who or what is Dollmann? Would fixing the date of his

change of allegiance help to explain him? Davies does his best, using the publication of Dollmann's sailing book as a point of reference: "Let's work the thing out. Sixteen years ago he was still an Englishman, an officer in Her Majesty's Navy. Now he's a German. At some time between this and then, I suppose, he came to grief—disgrace, flight, exile. When did it happen?" (165). But what does "it" mean? Rather than coming "to grief," as Davies assumes, might not Dollmann have turned from Britain on principle or toward Germany out of love? That the preface purposefully refrains from specifying the year in which the novel's events occur perhaps invites speculation. But even if one assumes that Davies and Carruthers sail along the German coast the same year as Childers and his brother did, in 1897, the history of Anglo-German relations in the early 1880s offers no clear answer to the mystery of Dollmann's defection. While shifting the date closer to the time of *The Riddle's* publication would bring into play the Berlin Conference (1884), it's hard to see how that would elucidate Dollmann. It's even harder to accommodate into the novel's timeline an event that might actually affect one's reading: the accession in 1888 of Kaiser Wilhelm II, who makes a veiled appearance at the climax of the novel. Unless, of course, Dollmann has switched allegiance more recently than Davies and Carruthers believe. But there's no way to know.

- 23 See Nicholas Freeman, *Conceiving the City: London, Literature, and Art 1870–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 89–134.
- 24 Freeman, *Conceiving the City*, 35–88.
- 25 For another example of how spy fiction heightens suspense by employing delay-tactics that also risk tedium and distraction, consider Ian Fleming's chapter on the rules of baccarat in *Casino Royale* (1953).
- 26 Impressed by the Brunsbüttel light, "a wonderful piece of mechanism" that seemed "almost too complicated," Childers noted on October 7, 1897 that, "A blaze of many-coloured lights marked the canal entrance" (*TS*, 85). The next day he added: "This is an immense canal only just made, and rather too grand for us" (86).
- 27 See Paul St. Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 28 Nicholas Allen, *Ireland, Modernism and the Coast: Seatangled* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 39.