

*The Crime Scene as Museum: The (Re)construction in the Bresciano Series  
of a Historical Gibraltar Past*

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**Abstract:** The “Bresciano” series of seven historical detective novels (2010-2015) by Sam Benady and Mary Chiappe set in a period of four decades early in the British imperial history of Gibraltar from the 1780s to the 1820s provides an excellent opportunity not only for reconstructing a significant image of the historical past of the colony – and possibly also of its current status – but also for investigating a complex of critical approaches to such writing in terms of historical crime fiction, post-coloniality, and the wider ramifications of the function of cultural-historical “museumification” and its impact on the literary narrative. The present brief study should be regarded as an introductory discussion rather than a definitive analysis.

**Keywords:** Gibraltar, Bresciano, crime fiction, museumification, historical memory, reconstructed narrative memory

### **Contexts**

In the course of some five or six years, between 2010 and 2015, a duo of native Gibraltar friends, Sam Benady and Mary Chiappe, both in their seventies, produced a collaborative seven-volume series of detective novels set in early colonial Gibraltar. The novels encompass in particular the Great (French and Spanish) Siege of Gibraltar of 1779-1783 (itself staged during the course of American liberation from the British Empire) and its domestic and international aftermath at a level of historically detailed domestic life that is complemented by overt reference to the increasing imperial significance of the territory for the British, their allies and their enemies. As fiction, the detective perspective is channelled through the nascent amateur skills of a character named Giovanni Bresciano, a local merchant of Genoese descent, who ages with the series from his youth through to his mid-50s.

For its chronology the series covers a span of some four decades. Thus, the earliest historical reference of the series commences in 1779 with that of the second completed

novel, *Fall of a Sparrow* (2011), set at the iconic, extended moment of the Great Siege, and closes with *The Dead Can't Paint* (2015), linked in part with the historical visit of a French exploration vessel the *Uranie*, bound for the South Seas, but also in part with the later fictional historicity of Sherlock Holmes. Thus, the time-settings of the Bresciano novels do not entirely coincide with the sequence of writing and publication of the novels themselves, since the first to appear was *The Murder in Whirligig Lane* (2010, set in 1813 at the time of a Yellow Fever epidemic in the colony). This title and the subsequent *Fall of a Sparrow* have been succeeded by *The Pearls of Tangier* (2011; set in 1789; William Lempriere's visit to Morocco);<sup>i</sup> *The Prince's Lady* (2012; set in 1790; Prince Edward, King George III's fourth son, stationed with the British military in Gibraltar); *The Devil's Tongue* (2013; set in 1793, at the start of the Anglo-French Wars ending in 1802); *Death in Paradise Ramp* (2014; set in 1802, and featuring the colonial governorship of the "licentious" Duke of Kent and the 1802 Gibraltar Mutiny); and *The Dead Can't Paint: Bresciano and the French Inheritance* (2015; set in 1817). At the end of this relatively compact heptalogy, the authors aver that, between his first case at the age of 18 and his last, not only has the protagonist survived to the age of 55 but "Bresciano lives on!"<sup>ii</sup>

My initial premise is that, given the completion of series, it deserves close treatment (if only briefly here) not only as a significant part of increased literary production since 2000 by local Gibraltar authors, but also as an extended narrative that treats the earliest years of Gibraltar as a militarized British colony that continues to exist to the present day. Given this framework, my intention is also, in part, to indicate a number of critical approaches that may help to focus on the broad (and in the context of Gibraltar writing, controversial) label of "postcolonial" detective fiction, in particular through attention to the concept of "museumification", in this case in reference to a literary construct rather than the more widespread application of the conception in the field of architecture and the city – although these, too, have a bearing on the present initial discussion.

My starting-point, however, draws on an observation made by Stephen Knight in his definitive study *Crime Fiction Since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2010). Knight's verdict on the run of historical crime fiction may perhaps be considered somewhat dismissive of the subgenre:

[M]any periods and locations are used to combine the knowledge-rich security of historicism with elementary crime fiction plots. The link often made to the "cozy" [crime novel] is credible in that the politics of historical crime fiction are basically traditional, including in terms of gender and race. (Knight 2010: 225; my italics)

According to the Wikipedia entry (which in the present case may be regarded as uncontroversial), the notion of "cozy" crime or mystery fiction can also be considered a positive marketing ploy: "also referred to simply as 'cozies,' are a subgenre of crime fiction in which sex and violence are downplayed or treated humorously, and the crime and detection take place in a small, socially intimate community". Interestingly, however, the US critic Marilyn Sasio, writing in *The New York Times* in 1992, points out that the appeal of the "cozy" is reportedly strongest amongst a female readership, thus tapping into the burgeoning gender politics of the past two or three decades (Stasio 1992: n.p.n.).<sup>iii</sup>

In light of the stand-off between Knight's dismissive view and the intriguing but fragmented approaches to the cozy subgenre suggested by its authors, publishers and readership, I will attempt here to approach Benady and Chiappe's fiction not solely in terms of their stated intention to investigate an imaginary crime (i.e., a murder mystery, narrativized within conventional literary constraints) but also through their repeated endeavours to create a valid, historically centred historical cultural narrative, that of early Gibraltar, as an extended indigenous "tale" rather than one told by outsiders. It might even be claimed that Benady and Chiappe have constructed their series in the same spirit as that expressed by the mainstream Gibraltar novelist, M. G. Sanchez, who has suggested that his own writing is primarily concerned with "giving Gibraltarians a linguistic and cultural space for themselves. [...] If we don't start writing about ourselves, we run the risk of being presented to the world solely through the prism of others' perceptions" (Sánchez 2015: n.p.n.).

Appropriately, therefore, given their shared pan-Iberian location, an especially provocative approach is suggested by Jose F. Colmeiro's discussion of the Spanish detective as "cultural other" in Carlos G. Reigosa's Galician vernacular *Crime en Compostela* (1984). Foremost in Colmeiro's reading of Reigosa is his speculation that the "old city" of Santiago de Compostela

is the *real protagonist* of the novel, having become a living art museum for tourists (modern-day pilgrims), a lively university town, and the seat of the newly restored Galician Autonomous Government. The city is the narrative space in a symbolic search for collective marks of identity through architecture, geography, history, legends, food, and popular customs. (Colmeiro 2001: 181; my italics)

Transferred to the Bresciano series, this view may well help to provide a centred re-reading of the seven novels, no longer in terms of their common "distractor", the potentially "cozy" human protagonist, Giovanni Bresciano, but for their re-construction of a historical Gibraltar – *vide* Reigosa's contemporary Santiago de Compostela – as a narrative "museumification" of the territory. In consequence, my intention here is to discuss some of the implications of museumification *per se*, especially with regard to ways in which it may feature in the Bresciano heptalogy, concentrating in particular on the chronologically first title in the series, *Fall of a Sparrow*, whose setting is crucially located at the historical frontier between Gibraltar and Spain.

### **Museumification**

As a theorized notion, museumification seems to have given rise to a number of somewhat disparate and even contradictory ideas. For obvious reasons, it has also emerged predominantly in the general area of architecture, heritage, and tourism, and only secondarily in relation to literary studies. For example, Michael A. Di Giovine's 2009 study titled *The Heritage-Scape* defines the term as the process of "transition from a living city to that of an idealized re-presentation of itself, wherein everything is considered not for its use but for its value as a potential museum artefact" (261). Di Giovine also suggests that to distinguish between "regular" institutional museums and the museumification of actual, experienced (though now disappeared) urban

environments, the process requires the active participation of genuine local people rather than the perhaps more scholarly intrusion of knowledgeable outsiders (Di Giovine 2009: 261).

Pertinent to this architectonic argument is an online article dated 2013 in which, under the compelling headline “Is Amsterdam Turning into a Museum?” the Dutch critic Alexandra Mientjes claims that

Museumification entails the process of denominating certain buildings or areas as monuments of history (either official or unofficial), which often leads to an arresting [i.e., conspicuous, astonishing] development of that specific building/area. *They are declared sacred*, as it were.. (Mientjes 2013: n.p.n.; my italics)

Mientjes also notes that in terms of heritage the process is often referred to, negatively, as a form of “disneyfication” and of the conversion of “a ‘living’ city into a ‘dead’ city. Or, in some cases, turning a free space for locals into a commodity for tourists”. Contrastingly, she also suggests that a new focus on cultural heritage “functions as a testimony of our identity (as human beings, or more specifically as Dutch people)”. But the downside of this view is, precisely, the problem of *whose* view: only too often, the dominant reading of a museumified Amsterdam, Mientjes suggests, is that of the “dominant white (male) population of the Netherlands” (Mientjes 2013: n.p.n.).

It may be somewhat facile to extend versions of Mientjes’s observations to other famous cities such as Venice or (closer to my present home) the starkly contrasting areas – the old and the new, the medievalized *versus* the commercialized – of a capital city like Tallinn, and perhaps provocatively even more so in the case of the city-within-a-city: the Vatican City encapsulated within the greater city of Rome itself. In the case of crime fiction, no doubt like many other readers, I willingly read Ian Rankin’s Rebus novels as much for their particularized male reading of the historical and present city of Edinburgh as I do for their spin on the processes of the Scottish police procedural. At the same time, I also read Sara Paretsky’s Chicago novels as much for their vision of that decaying, yet repeatedly resuscitated, city as I do for their radically “sensible”, liberal-feminist take on American gender politics.

These examples are, however, a far cry from the “cozy” historical fictions contained in the Bresciano novels. If these seven novels indeed depend on a museumification of a Gibraltarian past, it may be worth considering the extent to which they have been influenced by the combined historical visions of their two – local – authors, one male, the other female, both of them with previous professional lives that were rooted in their contemporary “lived” community, respectively as paediatrician and as educationalist. This, in turn, then raises the question of the extent to which Benady and Chiappe have absorbed and also deployed the kind of fictional commodification of the past decried by a critic such as Neil McCaw in his study of English crime fiction and its adaptation for television. McCaw’s discussion focuses on museumification in the context of crime fiction, consisting of a brief, but telling, analysis of Agatha Christie’s *At Bertram’s Hotel* (1956), a fairly minor Miss Marple mystery, although one that was adapted at least twice for British television, first by the BBC in 1986, and again in 2007 for ITV. In brief, McCaw’s analysis can be regarded as heavily polemical, detecting the “sick

culture” of a fading, urbane Englishness that, under the memorializing scrutiny of Miss Marple, is revealed to be a significant symptom of the decline of Empire (McCaw 2011). This may well be pertinent to a fuller discussion of the present brief treatment of the Bresciano novels.

### *Fall of a Sparrow*

On the level of narrative in the series, the identity of the amateur detective, Giovanni Bresciano, is, in historical terms, particular to the historical and geopolitical settings of *Fall of a Sparrow*; Bresciano is constructed as a loyal, balanced, conventional, indigenous inhabitant of that peculiar Gibraltarian fragment of the larger Empire, the son of an immigrant Italian ship chandler, who in the course of the series himself becomes a chandler and merchant whilst simultaneously functioning as something new: an amateur investigative eye, and hence also a critic of the functioning of an urban environment that is frequently threatened by both internal and external disruption. To this extent, therefore, Bresciano more than fulfils the normal terms of conventional detective fiction.

In addition, even at first glance it becomes clear that Benady and Chiappe have set out to devise a potentially complex formula for their fiction: a Gibraltar imagined at an early moment in its colonial formation, at a conflicted period in its history, with a protagonist whose identity is hybrid, both Gibraltarian and British. In *Fall of a Sparrow* Bresciano is both fledgling recruit to the local British garrison and also a character inching towards an awareness of the ramifications of his self-appointed apprentice role as crime investigator; but he is also credibly hybrid in his imperial identity – his mother is English, while his father is a first-generation Gibraltarian, with Genoese origins. In addition, as the authors themselves have indicated in interview, Benady’s primary interest has been in “Gibraltar history and forensic and medical detail”, while Chiappe’s has been in the “social history of the period”,<sup>iv</sup> aims that find their focus in and through Bresciano’s role as an increasingly observant, investigative Gibraltarian citizen.

The first of the Bresciano novels, *The Murder in Whirligig Lane*, may in some senses be read as the two authors’ own “apprenticeship” piece in collaborative story-telling, but the very title of the novel, with its assertive deployment of the definite article within the context of a now-extinct but historical place-name, suggests an intention to recall an event that, despite its fictionality, can be imagined as part of a collective memory: essentially, a reconstructed Gibraltarian experience: arguably, an instance of museumification. As popular reviewers have noted, the plot of this first novel in the series is coherent, and the solution of the crime plausible.<sup>v</sup> *Fall of a Sparrow*, in contrast, appears to mark the authors’ growing awareness of the complexity of the task in hand, as already mentioned above: “to show our community in the process of its formation”, to create a Gibraltarian narrative, and to explore some of the origins of the present-day community. As Benady has informally commented in response to a question concerning allusions to some of the named characters in this and other novels,

We used real Gibraltarians where we could [e.g., in *The Devil’s Tongue*]: Menahem Benady was my g-g-g-grandfather and *was* a shoemaker. Abraham Hassan was a cousin 4 times removed and did volunteer during

the Siege. Sgt Miles is Mary's husband's g-g-grandfather and was in the first Gib police force (later, in 1830) and there are others. [... Jane Austen's] Capt Wentworth started it all – I then found it amusing [in *The Murder in Whirligig Lane*] to have him read *Sense and Sensibility*.<sup>vi</sup>

It may also be noted that in the Cast of Characters included at the start of *Fall of a Sparrow*, the authors have listed the names of “real historical personalities” in bold – including the Governor of Gibraltar, General Elliott, and, notably, that of Lieutenant John Drinkwater, “Diarist of the Siege” – while adding a secondary allusion to the fictional cast: “[t]he others are no less real to us” (Benayd and Chiappe 2011: n.p.n.).<sup>vii</sup>

The potential museumification of the historical moment is both transparent and persuasive. The story effectively starts in 1780, “eighteen long, hungry months [...] since the start of the Spanish blockade” (5). The Siege conditions are reflected in the protagonist's symbolic view of his home, where he arrives to reveal that he has joined the local British military forces in defence of his community: “the large room [...] was the centre of family life, but the house seemed empty” (7) – the symbolism of the home requires populating with human relationships, which in the construction of the communal story necessarily undergo threats to their survival in the form of malnutrition and disease.

An immature eighteen year-old, Giovanni Bresciano, stands out from his fellow soldiers as an individual who is “curious to hear more” (28) from them concerning the violence suffered by a fellow soldier, Jamie Macfarlane, whose ethnic “difference” as a Scot eventually proves crucial in the solution of the mystery surrounding his death. In this regard, Bresciano's role is to convey curiosity and then suspicion: has Jamie suffered accidental violence and then, as a result of his damaged mind, committed suicide, or has he become the victim of murder? The first stage is for the fledgling amateur detective to discover for himself the “only rational explanation” (31), and then to convince others, firstly a childhood friend and fellow local recruit, Abraham Hassan, whose simple role is to indicate the route that Bresciano must take as an investigator: “Giovanni, you have to look at the actual facts carefully” (43). This process becomes crucial to Bresciano's detective maturation after Jamie's death by hanging, where the search for the location of a missing key becomes symbolic as well as factual.

The second stage in Bresciano's detective apprenticeship is then to consolidate suspicions through detailed consideration of others' potential motives. Again, his mentor Abraham acts as guide: “You have given me a number of names of people who might have had a grudge against Jamie, but have you cited a single powerful motive?” (85). This dilemma continues through much of the novel, with the narrative voice, at a mid-point in the investigation, reminding the reader that “[w]hile Bresciano had the intelligence to resolve the puzzles that Jamie's death faced him with, he had more imagination than organizational skills and his investigation was lurching on from one random idea to the next. He was himself aware of it: he knew he should have looked for the key sooner” (121).

Perseverance, naturally enough, eventually pays off: Bresciano gathers evidence, harbours his suspicions, and enhances his own understanding of the process of death

itself by questioning the more experienced regiment cook about the onset of rigor mortis in human cadavers:

“No! I mean, when you find a dead body, how can you tell when he died?”  
“Most dead bodies I seen ‘ve bin on the battle field. [...] Funny that. Sometimes they was limp when it ‘ad all just ‘appened. An’ sometimes, when we ‘ad to wait to collect the dead, it were a different tale. Stiff as a board they’d be. Awful – lyin’ there all twisted and stiff like wooden dolls. Been dead for hours. And ‘ere’s a strange thing. [...] We’d ‘aul away to get these rigid corpses moved, sweatin’ over it [...] and if we could ‘ave waited to the next day, the job would’ve been that much simpler. That’s it, you see: first you’re floppy, then you go all stiff and then you go floppy again.”  
(174-175)

The “naïve” learning process involved in the honing of Bresciano’s suspicions and his accumulation of keys to the resolution of the crime eventually fails to direct him by means of rationalization to reveal the identity of the perpetrator. Instead, his assiduous pursuit of misleading lines of inquiry places him in immediate danger of becoming the killer’s next victim. But Bresciano now understands the process that has led him into danger, and his future as an occasional detective who will act in civilian life on behalf of his community, Gibraltar, is ultimately certified by the (historical) Governor of Gibraltar, General Eliott himself: “I congratulate you on as pretty a piece of deductive work as I have seen” (283).

### **Provisional conclusions**

In light of the stand-off between Knight’s dismissive view of, and the intriguing but fragmented approaches to, the cozy subgenre suggested by its authors, publishers and readership, my approach has been to read Benady and Chiappe’s fiction in terms of a complex attempt on their part to investigate not only an imaginary crime (i.e., a murder mystery, narrativized within conventional literary constraints) but also their attempt to investigate and explore valid methods – especially that of “museumification” – for recreating a historical cultural narrative, including its actual telling as a “tale”. As Sanchez has emphasized, the narrative of Gibraltar is always at risk of oversimplification in the views and narratives of outsiders, with the result that the indigenous perspective becomes overlooked and ignored in the modern world. Arguably, this may well be a common experience in colonized cultures.

Hence, while my initial reading of the Benady/Chiappe narratives has been in terms of their presentation of a constructed “memory” of a fictional character, it is also Bresciano’s community – Gibraltar – that not only has its own roots embedded in “real” place and time but also has its own ongoing, imaginary connections with present times. As Benady has commented, “we aimed to show our community in the process of its formation, with a backdrop of real events – the Siege, the epidemic, etc”, which Chiappe has augmented with the comment: “though [we] never formulated such a purpose per se”; predictably, like many effective story-tellers, their stated primary aim has been “to tell a good story”.<sup>viii</sup>

A telling moment in my email interview with the authors is contained in another chance observation of Sam Benady's when he suggests that a secondary aim of their writing, from his perspective, has been "to bring Gibraltar history to our reading public", modestly adding in parentheses: "(mostly Gibraltarian!)". For Benady and Chiappe, the problem of distribution and readership has been compounded by publication that has been only local, and thus while there may be some ambiguity in Benady's response, there must also be some wryness in his consideration of the extremely limited scope locally for cultivating a readership: do the Bresciano narratives appeal solely to a Gibraltarian readership, dependent on their insiders' familiarity with the historical referents, or can the authors design their narratives for consumption by, say, a British public with a partial awareness of the Rock as an imperial icon, or eventually, perhaps in translation, by a future, hypothetical Iberian readership, perhaps one whose own perspective on Gibraltar has undergone "translation"?<sup>ix</sup>

Where the Bresciano novels coincide with general descriptions of post-colonial crime fiction (as opposed to colonial narratives produced by "settler" authors) may be seen, at least in part, in the identity of their protagonists:

*Post-colonial detectives are always indigenous to or settlers in the countries where they work; they are usually marginalized in some way, which affects their ability to work at their full potential; they are always central and sympathetic characters; and their creators' interest usually lies in exploration of how these detectives' approaches to criminal investigation are influenced by their cultural attitudes.* (Christian 2001: 2)

Ed Christian concludes from this generalization that "books featuring post-colonial detectives are interesting not only because of their plots and the quality of their writing but because of their revelations of diverse cultures" (2001: 2).

For obvious reasons, this would appear to be problematic in the context of historical crime fiction emerging from a culture such as that of Gibraltar: Giovanni Bresciano is by no means a "post-colonial" protagonist. Equally, Gibraltar, situated at the present moment between its self-governing status as the most populous of Britain's remaining overseas territories and its historical dilemma as a geopolitical appendage to the Iberian land-mass, nicely complicates and frustrates any quest for satisfactory categorization. Christian's discussion of post-colonial detective protagonists seems, nevertheless, to provide a potential solution. He suggests that "these [post-colonial] detectives are in process, they are learning, adjusting, changing, compromising, rejecting, resisting. They are not heroes of the resistance, out to destroy the oppressor. They are all employed, whether publicly or privately – they answer to employers" (2001: 13). In this view, fictional detectives in the post-colonial process function in an apprentice capacity, and play a conservative role – their function is, after all, to restore order and equilibrium to their community rather than to re-form it. In brief, their role, from a textual perspective, with the unravelling of the crime, is for a community and its individual members to discover how to become again what they have been previously. But they have also to create a new consciousness – in some sense, a "museum" of reconstructed memory – of how their previously secure past cannot be restored: violence has occurred, and the victim(s) and their community have undergone an unwilling transformation. On our behalf, as readers, Christian suggests, such investigative characters undertake a form of

surveillance, “observation of both the empire and the indigenous culture; the observation of disparities, of ironies, of hybridities, of contradictions. Now the surveillance is not for imperial dominance, though, but for the restoration of what is right” (2001: 13).

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<sup>i</sup> William Lempriere subsequently published his travelogue, *A Tour from Gibraltar (sic) to Tangier, Sallee, Mogadore, Santa Cruz, Tarudant and thence over Mount Atlas to Morocco* (London, 1791).

<sup>ii</sup> Personal email with Sam Benady, 9 Feb. 2015.

<sup>iii</sup> See also the web "Cozy Mystery List: A Guide to Cozy Mystery (and Other Favourite) Books and DVDs".

<sup>iv</sup> John A Stotesbury, unpublished email interview with Sam Benady and Mary Chiappe, 4 Feb. 2015.

<sup>v</sup> See, e.g., the compilation of general reviews at <http://manilvalife.com/179/>, accessed 6 Apr. 2015.

<sup>vi</sup> Sam Benady, Personal email, 4 Feb. 2015; Original abbreviations.

<sup>vii</sup> Page numbers without further indications hereon refer to this work.

<sup>viii</sup> Email interview with the author, 4 Feb. 2015.

<sup>ix</sup> Benady's earlier historical novel is entitled *The Keys of the City: An Episode in the History of Gibraltar* (2005).

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