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In *Equipping James Bond: Guns, Gadgets, and Technological Enthusiasm*, André Millard, professor of history at The University of Alabama at Birmingham, recounts the history of espionage and its technology through the world of James Bond—the movies, the books, and his creator, Ian Fleming. Millard argues that although the James Bond character and the gadgets he employs are products of World War II, the films evolve with subsequent eras. Thus, 007’s equipment reflects modernity, both in the technology of the times and in society’s anxieties. Cold War era Bond plots, for example, reflect nuclear anxieties as they played out in real life. In the film adaptations of Fleming’s character, we see the evolution of nuclear technology as 007’s enemies wield them in different terrifying ways. Millard also contends that it is more than Bond’s equipment that reflects these themes; it is also the evolution of Bond’s storylines and character and the equipment employed by his enemies.

Millard deftly elucidates that, despite the plots keeping up with the times, Fleming nostalgically centers Bond as the sole hero who saves the day, anachronistically ignoring the heroes behind the scenes and the key intelligence-gathering technology they used, such as codebreaking and aerial photography. “Fleming’s technological enthusiasm, at least in his writing, was always tempered by a nostalgic reverence for the past—its values and its heroes,” Millard writes (pp. 3-4). “Fleming would much rather tell a good story based on ingenuity and violent action than give prominence to the scientific work that goes on in the backroom of an office building” (p. 67).

Fleming’s experiences in naval intelligence during World War II heavily influenced Bond, his heroic adventures, and his gadgets. With a position that gave him “a bird’s-eye view of intelligence operations,” Fleming created Bond and his co-stars (including Q, Bond’s quartermaster) from the myriad men Fleming encountered and heard about in the intelligence community (pp. 63).

007’s gadgets in the films often crossed the line from cutting edge to highly futuristic. With a
“the bigger the better” attitude, Eon Productions developed gadgets that were improbable for the times.[1] The ejector seat in Bond’s Aston Martin DB5, for example, did represent real technology (the German air force developed ejector seats during World War II), but using an authentic ejector seat would have damaged the car, forcing the props department to eject a dummy with compressed air.

Beyond his academic background as a historian of technology, Millard’s cultural perspective as an Englishman in the United States writing about an English character is certainly a useful background. In the chapter “Treasure Hunt,” Millard posits that Fleming was influenced by the novel Treasure Island, and briefly uses his own life as supporting evidence: “Nearly every English boy in the twentieth century came under the spell of Robert Louis Stevenson’s Treasure Island, this author among them. Fleming was another whose imagination soared while reading about pirates on the Spanish Main, exotic tropical islands, secret maps, and that ‘Treasure Island atmosphere of excitement and conspiracy’” (pp. 95-96, emphasis added).

One may assume—based on the publisher (Johns Hopkins University), Millard’s university affiliation (The University of Alabama at Birmingham), and Bond’s popularity in the United States—that the primary audience of Equipping James Bond is American. While Equipping James Bond is written primarily for an academic audience familiar with the titular subject matter, fans of the Bond franchise and technology enthusiasts will find Millard’s tome accessible and engaging.

The book contains no visual aids; employing images of the many guns, gadgets, vehicles, and set designs discussed would have supported the book immensely. The author provides a list of abbreviations to support in-text citations of Bond novels. The index and endnotes are well done, though more citations throughout the book as well as the inclusion of a bibliography would have been beneficial.

Overall, Millard’s well-written book offers a valuable take on espionage history and equipment and details the real-life influences of one of the most popular fictional literary and on-screen characters.

Note

[1]. As Millard points out, not all gadgets featured in the Bond films were improbable. In Thunderball (1965), Bond uses a device similar to the Sky Hook, an airplane system that quickly extracts operatives from the ground. It was developed in the United States for picking up mail in the 1930s and was later modified for military use.
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