

DANGER MAN



Before *The Prisoner* there was *Danger Man*. A key figure in the popularity of both programmes was their star, Patrick McGoochan. Jon Abbott looks back at the taut and tough TV exploits of John Drake, *Danger Man*—Patrick McGoochan's secret agent apprenticeship for *The Prisoner*.

Like most of the surviving U.K. television series of the past, *Danger Man* was originally made to make money in the all-important U.S. market. In those early days no-one was remotely interested in "television history", and certainly not the small amount of "old TV" that was being accumulated. Many TV shows, including classic episodes of *Hancock's Half-Hour* and *Doctor Who* amongst many others, were 'wiped', and new programmes recorded over them. Consequently, those series that survive today are mostly the filmed ones made for the U.S. syndication market.

The pioneer of television exports was undoubtedly Lew Grade, the man best known to fantasy buffs for putting up the money for Gerry Anderson's legendary puppet series. Grade worked from ATV in the midlands, and formed the Independent Television Corporation (ITC) in 1960, after the success of a number of half-hour adventure shows, sold abroad mainly as cheap time-fillers.

Having fixed his sights on the big three networks in the states, ABC, NBC and CBS, which was where the money was, he specialised in imitations of U.S. formats during the sixties even though, ironically, he began by also exploiting the American envy of Britain's colourful history as well.

The first U.K. series made for syndication was *Robin Hood* in 1955. This was not only plundered mythology for folk heroes for British youngsters, but had the dual benefit of exploiting American interest in British history. This was followed in 1955 with *The Buccaneers*, starring Robert Shaw, and *Sir Lancelot*, with William Russell (later *Doctor Who*'s first companion, teacher Ian Chesterton). However, *William Tell* (with Conrad Phillips) and *Charlie Chan* (with J. Carroll Naish) did not do as

well. By this time, the Americans were exploiting their own folk heroes in similarly rose-tinted fashion, and just about every potential adventurer from *Superman* to *Kit Carson* was being featured in TV adventures. Grade was not deterred though; as late as 1963, *Richard The Lionheart* was in production, with Dermot Walsh as King Richard, a 'hero' surely on par with America's 1967 *Legend Of Custer!*

In 1957, producer Ralph Smart came up with *The Invisible Man*, a show complete with an anonymous actor in a heavy coat that rather obviously covered his head as well as his body! These were the early days of TV though, and both British and American audiences were impressed. On the strength of this, Smart and Grade came up with *Danger Man*, which made its U.S. debut in 1961... and sunk without trace. Retitled *Secret Agent* (although still known as *Danger Man* in the U.K.), the show was extended to an hour-length format, given a new springy theme (by Edwin Astley, who wrote the music scores for most of Grade's sixties adventure shows)... and took off.

Watching *Danger Man* today is rather like looking at the performance of a middle-aged athlete or elderly dancer - you have to understand the age factor and respect them for what they achieved in their day, rather than judging them by present standards of sophistication. In its day, *Danger Man* was classy, top-notch entertainment, rather superior to many contemporary series. The plots were new and original, the obvious resolutions were twist endings, and the stilted dialogue was delivered by good actors. The production values were good for the period, even though today TV techniques have progressed so far as to make the show display its age rather obviously. Yet still its virtues - McGoohan's strong, understated performance, the shadowy, moody camerawork, the lack of story padding, the absence of silliness, if not contrivance - shine through. The show may not belong in the category of timeless television, but it deserves its place in the archives as the best of its kind.

SPY VS SPY

Danger Man had the good fortune to debut in America shortly before the film debut of James Bond in *Doctor No* and the subsequent spy craze that was to follow, with a surfeit of such spy dramas as *I Spy*, *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, *The Wild, Wild West*, *Amos Burke - Secret Agent*, *Honey West*, and many others. Although the first series of half-hour episodes came and went in its intended American market without causing much of a ripple, by the time the revamped 80-minute version hit U.S. screens in the summer of 1965,

the public were ready for the adventures of British Intelligence agent John Drake, as played by actor Patrick McGoohan.

McGoohan was a very straight-laced, direct and opinionated man, with strong views on television, politics and morality. Unlike James Bond and *UNCLE* agent Napoleon Solo, the character of John Drake had little time for women - McGoohan had insisted that a bedroom scene early in the series was written out, and none had appeared subsequently. Whereas the *James Bond* films were hopelessly sexist, and the *UNCLE* films, while not exactly offensive, indulged in the sixties sexual attitudes of the day toward women as an attractive diversion, both *Danger Man* and McGoohan's follow-up series, the legendary *The Prisoner*,

me". Crooked officials, defiant women, ruthless terrorists and cowardly double-agents all withered and fell at his steady gaze, staccato dialogue and right hook.

Many of the guest-stars in *Danger Man* were actors McGoohan had worked with in his previous film career; Patrick Wymark, Laurence Naismith, William Sylvester, Raymond Huntley, Duncan Lamont, and others. Other guest stars included Robert Shaw (*The Buccaneers*), Dermot Walsh (*Richard the Lionheart*), Wandy Craig (before her sit-com fame), Jean Marsh (*Upstairs, Downstairs*), Honor Blackman (*The Avengers* and *Goldfinger*), Lois Maxwell (Miss Moneybags in the *Bond* films and the voice of Lt. Atlanta in *Stingray*), and Alan Wheatley (well-known for many years as the villainous



might almost have been considered misogynist. In both series, women were either not to be trusted, menial appendages to the men, or both! Drake was no womaniser, and McGoohan allowed no sexual overtones in either series. Neither would Drake carry a gun considering them "ugly, oily things", although he did acquire a number of *Bond*-like gadgets during the later days of the series. His two clenched-fists solved most of his problems.

Each week, Drake would turn up in one foreign country or another, often in disguise, put right an international situation or diplomatic incident in thirty minutes, and disappear at the end of it. It was never quite made clear who he was working for - the opening narration referred to "a dirty job", and someone's got to do it - "that's when they call on me... or someone like

Sheriff Of Nottingham in *Robin Hood*). Some, such as George Coularis, Derrin Nesbitt and others, would later turn up in *The Prisoner*. Other guest stars turned up more than once; Donald Pleasance, Hammer film veteran Michael Ripper, and the then-unknown Warren Mitchell (TV's *Alf Garnett*) all appeared twice in the half-hour series. One amusing characteristic of the series is now-familiar faces, such as Mitchell, Ripper and John Woodvine turning up playing foreigners with names like Miguel, Abdul, and Luigi, or whatever, which didn't help credibility at all!

More recent repeats also brought other problems with credibility which were a little more bizarre than the inevitable ancient music score or unsophisticated back projection techniques. In the episode *An Affair Of State*,

we see the late John Le Mesurier, who would become one of the most familiar faces on television in the years to follow, shoot a man before the opening credits. For the rest of the episode, we hear only his distinctive voice as he sits before Drake with his back to the camera, only to be later revealed, to the accompaniment of a crescendo of dramatic music, as the murderer. Unfortunately by this stage, most viewers were already well aware that McGoochan had been conversing with Le Mesurier throughout the episode, despite the obscured features, because of his now instantly recognisable voice... then unknown. Little wonder that McGoochan himself sometimes seemed to forget where he came from, in some episodes he speaks with his recognisable accent, while in others – no doubt for the benefit of the all-important American market – he had been instructed to adopt a sort of trans-Atlantic bogus American. Perhaps all those disguises and episodes filmed out of sequence were getting to him.

THE MCGOOCHAN MOULD

Although his status was virtually mercenary-for-hire in the first series of 39 half-hour episodes (although he often seems to be working for NATO or

MI 5), the following hour-long series of 45 episodes (only two filmed in colour) defined him as an agent for British Intelligence. Unlike other agents, he rarely worked with a partner, even temporarily; John Drake was strictly a loner, and this lack of background or character development served only to increase his image as a defiant, professional and single-minded loner, a persona that undoubtedly helped with *The Prisoner*.



"I wanted Drake to be in the heroic mould" McGoochan said at the time of the series. "Like the classic western... which meant he had to be a good man. I see Drake as a man of high ideals, with a passionate belief in the dignity of mankind. He is a man who has done a lot of jobs in his time. He doesn't come from a well-off family. He had to struggle for an education. But he is not a

thick-ear specialist, a puppet muscleman. There is action, plenty of it, but no brutal violence. When Drake fights, he fights clean. He prefers to use his wits.

"I'm the first to admit I've done some rubbish in my career" he continued, "I enjoy playing the role, although when it was first put to me a few years ago I was a little worried about doing it. It's very difficult to maintain a high standard of production on a TV series. But I believe that most of the episodes have been quite good. Of course there have been the odd one or two that make me squirm when I think about them, but I've been extremely happy with the majority. An actor is rarely satisfied with his own work, and I'm terribly self-critical. I can't stand incompetence, and I hate having to sit through rubbish, whether it's on the cinema, or TV screen, or on stage. Teamwork is so obviously very important in a series, and we do have a marvellous team".

Channel 4 is presently showing the series out of sequence, although with *Danger Man*, unlike many series, it hardly matters. The show was shot out of sequence, with each episode taking fourteen days to film, a very slow pace by today's standards. Even then, most of the location work was done before the studio scenes. There were no continuing sub-plots or co-stars.

Although of Irish descent, McGoochan was born in America in

MEET... THE UNCANNY X-MEN!

NEIN, KAMERADEN - NOT US! WE ARE TALKING ABOUT THE CREATIVE TEAM BEHIND US...

BETTER BELIEVE IT, SUB! SHOOT THE BREEZE WITH CHRIS CLAREMONT AND ANN NOCENTI AT LONDON'S FORBIDDEN PLANET BOOK SHOP BETWEEN TWO AND FOUR ON WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON, MAY 22ND

I THINK THEY UNDERSTAND, STORM. THE ONLY OTHER THING THEY NEED TO KNOW IS THAT FORBIDDEN PLANET IS AT 23, DENMARK STREET, LONDON W1

S'RIGHT, NIGHTCRAWLER. AN' AH RECKON EVERY X-MEN FAN IN THE COUNTRY WOULD LIKE TO SAY HOWDIE TO WRITER CHRIS CLAREMONT, ARTISTS JOHN ROMITA JR. AN' DAN GREEN AN' EDITOR ANN NOCENTI.

DA, TOVARISCH - AND NOW IS THE TIME TO MEET THEM -- BECAUSE ALL FOUR ARE IN GREAT BRITAIN!

JOHN ROMITA JR. AND DAN GREEN WILL BE AT THE SAME PLACE BETWEEN TWO-THIRTY AND FOUR-THIRTY ON SATURDAY AFTERNOON, MAY 25TH -- YOU GOT ALL THAT...?

IT SHOULD BE A FASCINATING MEETING OF MINDS. I ONLY WISH I COULD BE THERE MYSELF...



1928. His parents moved from New York back to Ireland when he was a child, and later moved to Sheffield, where, fresh from collage, McGoohan became – after a succession of unrelated, menial jobs – assistant stage manager of a local repertory company. On the strength of his appearance in the stage version of *Moby Dick* for Orson Welles, he appeared in the film *Passage Home*, another stormy ships-at-sea epic in 1955. Produced by later *Avengers* producer Julian Wintle, and directed by Roy Baker, it was a minor role that led to a contract with Rank. A co-starring part followed, in a similar seafaring Wintle film for Rank, *High Tide At Noon*, but this time he was third in the cast. His next appearance, in the 1957 film *Hell Drivers*, teamed McGoohan with another sixties 'super-spy' Sean Connery, and also co-starred William Hartnell, the first and best, *Doctor Who*. In the years that followed, McGoohan worked with Joseph Losey (*The Gypsy And The Gentleman*, 1957), starred in the thriller *All Night Long* in 1961, the social drama *Life For Ruth* and *The Quare Fellow* in 1962, the Disney adventure film *Doctor Syn* in 1962, and, again for Disney, *The Three Lives of Thomasina*, with Susan Hampshire.

Two films for MGM followed the demise of *Danger Man*. The filming of *Ice Station Zebra* in 1968 with John Sturgess necessitated a longer break than anticipated during the filming of *The Prisoner*, which was when ITC pulled the plug on the proposed 26 episodes of this surreal follow-up to the John Drake saga (although McGoohan couldn't use the name of Drake, as the character belonged to Ralph Smart). In the meantime, producer David Tomblin, who had, like many of the crew on *The Prisoner*, worked with him on *Danger Man*, was faced with turning out three episodes without the Portmerion location (first discovered by McGoohan while doing location work on *The Paper Chase*, an early episode of *Danger Man*) and one – *Do Not Forsake Me ...* – without McGoohan! The result was some of the most inventive and imaginative television ever produced, but McGoohan was fast losing favour with the men holding the purse strings, and who had given McGoohan a free hand on the strength of the success of *Danger Man*. When McGoohan returned, he and Tomblin – with friends and sympathetic allies Leo McKern and Alexis Kanner – wrapped up the series on orders from above with the celebrated and

notorious *Fall Out*. Thus ended McGoohan's association with the people originally behind the *Danger Man* series.

Since then McGoohan has starred in a succession of big screen ventures, and like Robert Vaughn, another sixties super-spy, has found himself predominantly cast as an icy villain. Also like Vaughn, he has little trouble in finding acting work when it suits him, although he's done very little on television, having as little need for the security of TV as TV has had from him. *The Prisoner* may have been a cult show and an artistic success, but it was a major disappointment for ITV and the money men, who wanted, and expected, another *Danger Man*. Certainly *The Prisoner* caused a rapid fall from grace after the phenomenal success of *Danger Man* on the international market, but for McGoohan, and the viewers, *Danger Man* served its purpose. It was an entertaining series in its day, and it gave him the money and the clout to make *The Prisoner*, the series he wanted to make. And while *Danger Man* has despite McGoohan's powerful performance, not aged particularly well, it stands, with *The Prisoner*, as a television landmark, a symbol of its period rather than a shadow of it. ◆