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Rearming James Bond. Ian Fleming's Correspondence with Geoffrey Boothroyd

Dozbrajanie Jamesa Bonda. Korespondencja Iana Fleminga z Geoffreyem Boothroydem

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Słowa kluczowe: Ian Fleming, James Bond, Geoffrey Boothroyd, listy, broń palna

Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore the extent to which the portrayal of firearms in Ian Fleming's original James Bond book series was influenced by the letters exchanged between the writer and Scottish weapons expert Geoffrey Boothroyd from 1956 to 1964. Boothroyd's profound knowledge of the subject sparked Fleming's genuine interest, to such a degree that they embarked on a collaborative effort to diversify and accurately depict the firearms used by 007, as well as other fictional characters. It will be argued that this mutual endeavour was largely successful, although the writer did not always follow his advisor's suggestions and made some mistakes on that account.

To this day, Ian Fleming remains one of the most widely read British spy fiction writers. His *James Bond* works, set during the Cold War, have been translated into multiple languages and sold more than 100 million copies worldwide (Gammel and Mulhallen 2017/2018: 204; Holderness 2018: 38). In his 1962 article *How to Write a Thriller*, Fleming delves into the intricacies of his commercially successful 007 narrative formula, emphasising that it combines sensational action with realistically depicted locations and objects, the last two serving as “*points de repère* to comfort and reassure the reader on his journey into fantastic adventure”

(1962a: 61). Basically, the writer attempted to conceal the overall improbability of his plots beneath superficial layers of verisimilitude created by meticulous descriptions of, among others, hotels, restaurants, foods, drinks, cigarettes, clothes, cars, animals, and plants¹.

Irrespective of that, at the very beginning of his literary career, Fleming did not pay much attention to portraying firearms accurately. His knowledge of them was simply rudimentary, and while he was accustomed to consulting various experts on issues he was not sufficiently familiar with², he initially did not consider weapons as worth presenting in detail in his fiction. Hence, in Fleming's first four *James Bond* novels the protagonist sometimes uses ill-suited guns for the tasks he nonetheless miraculously manages to accomplish. For example, as observed by Alan Judd:

Recalling an assassination he [...] executed before *Casino Royale* starts, Bond describes shooting a man through the mouth at 300 yards with a Remington 30/30. That was a short-barrelled lever-action rifle such as we used to see in Westerns. I have the Winchester version, which is very similar. Both are heavy-hitting weapons designed to kill large animals at up to 200 yards, and are inaccurate beyond that. Even with a telescopic sight, which Bond says he had, I wouldn't put money on myself to hit a man anywhere at 300 yards, let alone a target as small as a mouth. But then I'm not James Bond (2012: XV).

Among the early enthusiasts of Fleming's fiction was Geoffrey Boothroyd, a weapons historian/connoisseur from Glasgow. The latter, despite his and his family's overall admiration for the then nascent *James Bond* series, decided to draw the former's attention to 007's "rather deplorable taste in firearms" (Fleming 1962b: 19). Boothroyd's first letter to Fleming, dated May 23, 1956, combines moderate criticism of the main character's arsenal with elaborate recommendations, complete with pictures, on how it could be enhanced. The suggestions chiefly concern replacing Bond's "ladyish" .25 Beretta pistol with a more powerful sidearm by the likes of a .38 S&W revolver. An exchange of holsters is also advised:

The Beretta will weigh, after it has been doctored, somewhere under 1 pound unloaded. If Mr. Bond gets himself an S&W .38 Special Centennial Airweight he will

¹ For an extensive discussion of verisimilitude in Fleming's spy thrillers, with a chief focus on his 1953 novel *Casino Royale*, see Urbanowicz 2023: 166–182.

² For more information, see Fleming 1962b: 19, Fleming 1962c: 70, Macintyre 2008: 118, Millard 2018: 9, and Smith 2020: 8.

have a real man-stopper weighing only 17 ounces [1.0625 pounds] loaded. The gun is hammerless so that it can be drawn without catching in the clothing and has an overall length of 6½ inches. Barrel length is 2 inches, but note that it is not 'sawn off' [...]. In order to keep down the bulk the cylinder holds 5 cartridges, and these are standard .38 S&W Special. It is an extremely accurate cartridge and when fired from a 2-inch barrel has, in standard loading, a muzzle velocity of almost 700 ft./sec. and muzzle energy of around 200 ft./lbs. This is against Bond's .25 Beretta with muzzle velocity of 758 ft./sec. but only 67 ft./lbs. muzzle energy [...]. Now to gun harness, rigs or what have you. First of all, not a shoulder holster for general wear, please. I suggest that the little Centennial Airweight be carried in a 'Lightning' Berns-Martin Triple Draw holster. This type of holster holds the gun in by means of a spring and can be worn on the belt or as a shoulder holster. I have played about with various types of holster for quite a time now and this one is the best (Fleming 1962c: 70).

Fundamentally, the quoted excerpt illustrates Boothroyd's deep knowledge of specific weapons as well as his general tendency to discuss them in a nuanced manner. Another model of the S&W, the .357 Magnum, is described in a similarly detailed fashion, albeit in this case proposed for a longer-range gun concealed in the protagonist's car.

According to Fleming's nephew, Fergus, his uncle's reaction to that particular letter was mixed, i.e., he was upset by the problems pointed out to him, but at the same time fascinated with Boothroyd's solutions (*The Man with the Golden...* 2015/2016: 140). The reply, dated May 31, is strictly positive in tone:

I really am most grateful for your splendid letter [...]. You have entirely convinced me, and I propose, perhaps not in the next volume of James Bond's memoirs but in the subsequent one, to change his weapons in accordance with your instructions. Since I am not in the habit of stealing another man's expertise, I shall ask you in due course to accept remuneration for your most valuable technical aid [...]. I was delighted with the photographs and greatly impressed by them [...]. As Bond's biographer I am most anxious to see that he lives as long as possible and I shall be most grateful for any further technical advices you might like to pass on to him (Fleming 1962c: 71–72).

Encouraged by Fleming's earnestly inquisitive response to the first letter, Boothroyd wrote another one, dated June 1, 1956. In it, he formally introduces himself as a firearms expert:

If I am to be considered for the post of Bond's ballistic man I should give you my terms of reference. Age 31, English, unmarried. Employed by I.C.I. Ltd. as Technical Rep in Scotland. Member of the following Rifle Clubs: N.R.A., Gt. Britain, English Twenty Club, National Rifle Association of America, non-resident member. St. Rollox Rifle Club, West of Scotland Rifle Club, Muzzle Loading Association of Gt. Britain.

I shoot with shotgun and rifle, target, clay pigeon, deer, but, to my deep regret, no big game [...]. I do both muzzle loading and breech loading shooting, load my own shotgun and pistol ammunition. Shoot with pistol mainly target and collect arms of various sorts. My present collection numbers about 45, not as many as some collections go but all of mine go off and have been fired by me (*The Man with the Golden...* 2015/2016: 145–146).

Having presented his credentials, Boothroyd proceeds to discuss specific guns. Among others, he provides additional comments on the impracticality of the holster and Beretta:

Bond's chamois leather pouch will be ideal for carrying a gun, but God help him if he has to get it out in a hurry. The soft leather will snag and foul on the projecting parts of the gun and he will still be struggling to get the gun out when the other fellow is counting the holes in Bond's tummy. Bond has a good point when he mentions [the high] accuracy [of the Beretta]. It's no good shooting at a man with the biggest gun one can hold – if you miss him. The thing about the larger calibres is, however, that when you hit someone with a man-stopping bullet they are out of the game and won't lie on the floor still popping off at you (*The Man with the Golden...* 2015/2016: 147).

Within Fleming's literary series, the protagonist's sudden abandonment of his cherished Beretta is rationalised across the fifth and sixth novel. First, in *From Russia with Love*, 007's silencer becomes entangled in his trouser waistband during a fight with Rosa Klebb, leaving him vulnerable to her attacks and, in the end, nearly costing him his life. Then, in *Dr. No*, M recalls that unfortunate incident in a conversation with his subordinate and orders him to start carrying a more reliable handgun in order to keep the "licence to kill". Consequently, Bond is rearmed, although his new primary weapon is not an S&W, but one of the firearms the writer's consultant originally proposed for the protagonist's adversaries. 007 receives a 7.65 mm Walther PPK from none other than "Major Boothroyd", a character loosely based on his namesake.

Ironically, that Major makes the error of pairing the automatic pistol with a revolver pouch. This mistake arose from Fleming's lack of awareness that the Walther did not match the Berns-Martin Triple Draw holster, which the real-life Boothroyd had recommended for the S&W .38 Special Centennial Airweight. The writer also confused that last firearm with the S&W .357 Magnum. His advisor had clarified that the former was effective at close ranges, while the latter at longer ranges. Notwithstanding, the fictional armourer equips Bond with a Centennial Airweight as a secondary weapon under the false belief that it has the power of a Magnum (Fleming 1962c: 70, 78).

Returning to Bond's troublesome silencer, Boothroyd's third letter to Fleming, dated June 29, emphasises that such accessories are more prevalent in fictional works than in real-life firearm applications. The consultant explains that attaching a functional sound suppressor to an automatic pistol would distort its balance. As regards silencing a revolver, he points out that the task is particularly problematic due to the gas escaping through the cylinder-barrel interface. The expert concludes that it is impractical to pair handguns with muzzle devices and, to illustrate this, specifically mentions the example of the Beretta, which would require a custom-made barrel to even work with one (Fleming 1962c: 76–77).

Irrespective of Boothroyd's scepticism, Fleming did not cease to include silencers in his fiction. His reply, dated July 12, acknowledges the aforementioned problems, but also, in defence of the said equipment, accentuates the overall utility of suppressing gunshot noise. The writer recalls his own experience of shooting from a Sten which, thanks to a silencer with rubber baffles, did not emit any sound except for a mechanical click (*The Man with the Golden...* 2015/2016: 152).

Still in the same letter, Fleming asks Boothroyd to lend him one of the guns shown in the previously attached pictures, namely the rather unique S&W .38 Special M&P whose modifications included a barrel sawn off to 2¾ inches and trigger guard cut away for quicker shooting:

By the way, the jacket of my present book [*From Russia with Love*] is going to be a trompe l'oeil, painted by the only English master in the art, called [Richard] Chopping, who really paints things so that you can pick them straight off the canvas. The picture will consist of a revolver crossed with a rose and it should be a very handsome affair. I have looked in vain for a Beretta .25 which would obviously be to the point but, if I fail to find one, would you care to have your own Smith & Wesson made forever famous? It is such a very handsome gun that, although it has nothing to do with the story, it would look so splendid on the jacket that that would not matter [...]. I suppose the artist would probably need the gun for around a month – possibly for the month of September. You send me a bill for the amount. Chopping is an extremely reliable and sensible man and you would not have to fear for its safety while in his keeping and, as the Deputy Commissioner of Scotland Yard is a close personal friend, we would have no complications over fire-arms certificates (*The Man with the Golden...* 2015/2016: 153).

Boothroyd's agreement to Fleming's request did cause some unforeseen trouble with the authorities, though of a different kind. This is tied to the investigation of the so-called "Burnside murders", committed against two women and one underaged girl in Glasgow on September 16, 1956, with the use of a .38 calibre gun. Boothroyd, a legally registered possessor of such a weapon living close to

the crime scene, found himself among the suspects. Unable to show his S&W to the police, he confessed that he had sent it to London to Fleming, whom he informed by phone about the difficult situation soon after. The writer was questioned as well and, with the help of his consultant's letters, managed to convince a sergeant not to confiscate the gun directly from Chopping, who was unaware of the whole affair (and without a firearms certificate). Coincidentally, that very same afternoon, the painter brought Fleming the finished artwork together with the S&W, enabling him to promptly return that last one to its owner. Thus, the murder suspicions against Boothroyd were dropped and his gun became immortalised on the first edition jacket of *From Russia with Love*, contributing to the commercial success of the novel in England and the USA. On a side note, the actual – and, in fact, serial – killer turned out to be Peter Manuel, nicknamed the “Beast of Birkenshaw” and hanged on the gallows at Barlinnie Prison on July 11, 1958³. His weapon was a Webley, not an S&W (Fleming 1962b: 22; Fleming 1962c: 77–78; Lycett 1995: 300–301; *The Man with the Golden...* 2015/2016: 162).

Earlier that year, shortly after the publication of *Dr. No*, Fleming received another letter from Boothroyd, dated March 23. In it, the advisor expresses gratitude for the inclusion of his fictional counterpart in the novel, but also pinpoints some firearms-related mistakes. First, he observes that the M1 carbine used by Bond is a Remington, while it should be a Winchester. Second, he highlights the aforementioned mismatch between the revolver holster and the automatic Walther. On the subject of efficient holsters for the S&W, he also suggests the Tom Threepersons model as a viable alternative to the Berns-Martin Triple Draw. To catch Fleming's interest, Boothroyd explains that Threepersons – the inventor

was a full blooded Cherokee Indian who had quite an adventurous life. His father was shot down in cold blood, Tom avenging the killing when the killer came out of jail. Tom went to Canada and served with the R.C.M.P. [Royal Canadian Mounted Police]. He then returned to Texas and served with the Pershing expeditionary force against Pancho Villa. He put in several years with the Border Guards and the El Paso police. How many gunfights he had and how many people he killed no one knows (*The Man with the Golden...* 2015/2016: 158)⁴.

Fleming's reply, dated April 2, expresses both gratitude for Boothroyd's meticulous detection of errors and irritation at their occurrence. The writer declares

³ For biographies of Peter Manuel, see Nicol 2008, MacLeod and McLeod 2009.

⁴ For more elaborate biographical notes of Tom Threepersons (not to be confused with Tom Three Persons), see Conley 2007: 241–243 and Correa 2014, online.

that he will attempt to introduce corrections in his future Bond stories in accordance with the advisor's suggestions. Fleming also acknowledges Tom Threepersons as an important historical figure, emphasising that his accomplishments should not be forgotten (*The Man with the Golden...* 2015/2016: 159).

For the most part, indeed, those and other Boothroyd's instructions were closely followed by Fleming, which enabled him to significantly reduce the number of mistakes in the then-forthcoming books. As for Threepersons, neither he nor his labelled holster is referenced in the original literary *James Bond* series. The writer does, however, mention the latter in a detailed instruction from the years 1958–1959 on how his protagonist should be adapted into a film character (this was an appendix to the early screenplay drafts of the 1965 film *Thunderball*, initially titled *James Bond of the Secret Service*). One of the guidelines reads “[Bond’s] guns are a Beretta (Abercombie and Fitch have one) worn in a shoulder holster or occasionally in a Tom Threepersons holster inside his trouser band. He also uses a Smith and Wesson Centennial Airweight for heavy work” (Thomas 2021, online).

Thus far, the discussion has revolved chiefly around 007's weapons. It is vital to stress that Boothroyd also offered Fleming a lot of advice on how to rearm the protagonist's adversaries. To illustrate this, it is sufficient to quote some of his recommendations from the letter of June 1, 1956. Those concern SMERSH, a fictional Soviet counterintelligence agency resembling the KGB and very loosely based on the real-life SMERSH⁵, a Stalin-era military organisation under the supervision of Victor Abakumov from 1943 to 1946 (Birstein 2011: 1–3; West 2011: VII–IX):

I would suggest that a member of SMERSH would in all probability make his choice from the following and use for preference either a Luger with an 8”, 10”, 12” or 16” barrel with detachable shoulder stock for assassination work from a medium distance, say across a street. A short-barrel 9mm. Luger (Model 08), 4” barrel, might be carried for personal protection, although it is rather large to carry about. In the same class as the Luger and having equal availability to someone employed by SMERSH would be the Polish Radon P.35. This takes the standard Luger cartridge and also the more powerful black bullet machine pistol 9mm round [...]. Another choice would be the Swedish 9mm Lahti [...]. It weighs 42 ozs loaded as compared with 32 ozs for the short barrel Luger. The Russian Tokarev pistol Model 30 appears to be the standard side arm of the Soviets [...]. This pistol looks like the Belgian Browning auto pistol made by Fabrique Nationale, Liege, except that it has an external hammer [...]. In this same general class would be the Walther P.38, which was used by the German army as a replacement for the Luger [...]. This also takes the 9mm cartridge. One of the advantages of the Walther is that it can be used double action, i.e., there is no

⁵ For a monograph on the real-life SMERSH, see Birstein 2011.

need to cock the hammer for the first shot provided the barrel has a cartridge ‘up the spout’. After the first shot the gun operates as does the normal auto pistol. For carrying on the person the following arms could be chosen: Walther PPK 7.65 mm, Mauser HSc 7.65 mm or the Walther PPK in 7.65 mm cal., Sauer Model 35 in 7.65-mm calibre (*The Man with the Golden...* 2015/2016: 147–148).

The original literary Bond, much like his cinematic counterparts, frequently faces formidable opponents, capable of using lethal force. As observed by Ben Macintyre, the writer and his firearms advisor put a lot of effort into granting 007’s adversaries access to a wide variety of deadly weapons:

With Boothroyd’s help, the villains of SMERSH were kitted out, fictionally speaking, with 9 mm Lugers and Mauser 7.63 automatics. Fleming swiftly got over the belief that guns were dull, and under Boothroyd’s tuition became something of an expert: a staggering array of artillery is deployed in the Bond books, each described with full specifications, including a long-barrelled .45 Colt Army Special, a Savage 99F, a Winchester International Experimental .308 target rifle and a number of spear guns. Scaramanga, of course, totes a gold-plated single-action Colt .45 (2008: 132).

Curiously, despite their close cooperation, Fleming and Boothroyd did not meet in person until March 1961. The former came to Glasgow for an interview with Scottish television, which in itself proved quite an uncomfortable experience given that the interviewer was virtually unfamiliar with the *James Bond* series. Regardless, at the subsequent party organised by the Scottish Daily Express, the writer and his consultant attended a joint photo session, pretending to shoot revolvers at each other (*Glasgow Gun Fanatic...* 2015, online; *The Man with the Golden...* 2015/2016: 159).

Not long afterwards, Fleming experienced a heart attack and his health gradually began to deteriorate. Even so, until his death in 1964, he continued exchanging letters with Boothroyd, writing them personally or with the assistance of a personal secretary, Beryl Griffie-Williams. Much like her employer, she also developed a deep interest in their correspondent’s gun lore. The final major project the two men cooperated on was initially meant to become Fleming’s introduction to Boothroyd’s then upcoming book *A Guide to Gun Collecting* (1961), but the text eventually expanded into a rather lengthy account of their acquaintance. It was published in 1962 in the form of two slightly different magazine articles, namely *The Guns of James Bond* in the American “Sports Illustrated” and *James Bond’s Hardware* in the British “The Sunday Times” (*The Man with the Golden...* 2015/2016: 159–162). Both versions constitute sources of information for the present academic article and, as such, are listed in the bibliography.

At this point it is crucial to indicate that, already in his first letter to Boothroyd, Fleming envisaged recommending him for a firearms consultant to filmmakers working on cinematic adaptations of 007's adventures (Fleming 1962c: 71). Indeed, the Scottish expert was employed as an advisor by producers Albert "Cubby" Broccoli and Harry Saltzman when they were working on *Dr. No*, the first Bond film released by Eon Productions in 1962 (*The Man with the Golden...* 2015/2016: 162). Later, Saltzman also asked Boothroyd for instructions on shooting the boat chase scene in *From Russia with Love* (1963), particularly in relation to setting the water on fire. The suggested solution was to make Bond drop a number of fuel tanks from his motor boat, fire his Walther at them, and then an emergency flare to ensure the fuel catches fire. In the film, this was simplified in such a way that the pursuers, not 007, shoot holes in the tanks (*Glasgow Gun Fanatic...* 2015, online).

In 1964, shortly after Fleming's death, the BBC made a brief black-and-white documentary called *The Guns of James Bond*. It lasts about five minutes and was originally aired on BBC Two on September 17, which was also the London premiere day of Eon's third 007 film, *Goldfinger*. Hosted by Sean Connery, the featurette introduces Geoffrey Boothroyd and is primarily focused on him showing and discussing various weapons. The expert's overall delivery is very calm, informative, and a bit theatrical. First, he describes how his attentive perusal of Fleming's *Casino Royale* led the two of them to get to know each other. This is followed by an explanation of why a Beretta combined with a chamois leather holster is likely to get the protagonist killed. Next, Boothroyd talks about his personal preference for belt holsters over shoulder holsters and, to add some more weight to his words, performs a quick draw on the viewer. Subsequently, he digresses to Bond's ArmaLite rifle featured in the film *From Russia with Love*, claiming that it was one of the most spectacular on-screen weapons used by the character at that time. Later, Boothroyd lights a match with a pistol shot. Finally, he demonstrates, with the help of a can of tomato juice, the differences in the amount of damage done by bullets fired from a Beretta, a Walther PPK, and a Magnum. On the subject of the Walther, Fleming's ultimate replacement for Bond's Beretta, Boothroyd praises the quick first shot. He admits that this specific gun is an intrinsic part of 007's image, yet hopes that the character's evolution will still allow for the use of revolvers (*The Guns of...* 1964, online). Indeed, the protagonist does wield those in some film adaptations. Examples include the Colt Detective Special in *You Only Live Twice* (1967) and the S&W Model 29 .44 Magnum in *Live and Let Die* (1973).

Taking all of the above into account, Fleming and Boothroyd's cooperation was a mutually beneficial one. The former gained access to a credible and

extensive source of firearms-related knowledge, leading to their more realistic and diverse portrayal in his fiction and its adaptations. The latter, in turn, was granted the opportunity to leave his mark on a highly successful multi-media franchise, earning considerable fame and publicity in the process. It should be noted that apart from the literary Major Boothroyd, the cinematic Q is also partially based on the weapons expert (Lycett 1995: 119). One final remark is that it would be a mistake to perceive the correspondence discussed in this article as strictly – or even predominantly – business-like. Through letters, Fleming and Boothroyd befriended each other. They simply derived pleasure from maintaining contact and rearming James Bond (also, his adversaries).

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