

EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

CREATOR OF NORMAN CONQUEST,
'IRONSIDES' OF THE YARD
AND ST FRANK'S

BY NORMAN WRIGHT



Versatile and prolific: novelist Edwy Searles Brooks.

The name Edwy Searles Brooks is probably unfamiliar to all but a few collectors of pre-war boys papers. Yet under his pen-names of 'Berkeley Gray' and 'Victor Gunn', Brooks reached a huge audience with his novels featuring the crime-fighters Norman Conquest and 'Ironsides' Cromwell of Scotland Yard. This year sees the sixtieth anniversary of Conquest's first appearance in hardback and, to mark the event, Radio 4 have recently dramatised a number of the stories, featuring Christopher Cazenove as the plucky sleuth and Bonnie Langford as his partner, Joy Everard.

Edwy Searles Brooks was born on 11th November 1889 at Hackney, one of four children of a Congregational minister, the Reverend George Brooks. The family later moved to Norfolk, where Edwy was educated at Banham Grammar School. He wrote his first story, 'The Rocky Island, or The Treasure of the Barnabys', at the age of sixteen, but two years were to elapse before he made his first sale, to an obscure publication called *Yes and No*. Brooks claimed that he never made a living from any means other than writing, but in the early days he had difficulty in getting his work accepted.

He was a prolific writer whose working life spanned almost sixty years, from about 1907 until his death in 1965. The scope of his writing encompassed practically the entire field of popular fiction — adventure stories, science fiction, detective stories and, of course, school stories.

Early in his writing career, he wrote several serials for *The Gem*, beginning with 'The Iron Island' and its sequel, 'The Brotherhood of Iron'. As the titles suggest, they told the story of a man left on an island made almost entirely of iron. The metal gives him immense strength and, when he eventually escapes and returns to England, he seeks his revenge on those who marooned him. Each episode was about 16,000 words in length, and maintaining the serial for almost a year

must have been quite a task for the 21-year-old author. Like much of his early work, these serials were written under the pen-name, 'Robert W. Comrade'. Brooks had a weakness for extra-strong heroes, and they were to turn up regularly in his work.

In 1910, just after 'The Iron Island' began to appear in *The Gem*, Brooks contributed his first 'St Jim's' story to the paper. Though most of the tales concerning Tom Merry and Co were by Charles Hamilton under the pen-name 'Martin Clifford', stories by other authors were sometimes used. Over the years, Brooks wrote almost three dozen such tales. He also penned eighteen 'Greyfriars' stories for *The Magnet*.

DETECTIVE

June 1915 saw the launch of a new weekly boys' paper called *The Nelson Lee Library*. It was a small-format publication chronicling the adventures of detective Nelson Lee, a character who had first appeared in another boys' paper, *The Marvel*, twenty years earlier. For first two years of its life, *The Nelson Lee Library* published detective stories by a number of authors, including Brooks. His first contribution, 'Twenty Fathoms Deep', appeared in issue sixteen.

By January 1917, Brooks was writing over half the stories in the paper. The early adventures of Nelson Lee and his boy assistant, Nipper, were closely modelled on those of Sexton Blake and Tinker (see BMC 16 and 105), whose cases were appearing in *The Union Jack* and in the book-length *Sexton Blake Library*, which had started life a few months after *The Nelson Lee Library*, in September 1915. Nelson Lee came up against a regular cast of adversaries in the early numbers, including Jim and Penman, The Green Triangle and The Circle of Terror.

December 1916 saw the publication of the first Christmas double-number of *The Nelson Lee Library*, containing Brooks' sixty-page story, 'A Christmas of Peril'. This was an excellent tale, featuring Lee, Nipper, all of Brooks' regular villains, and Eileen Dare, the girl detective. Full of snow and danger, it was the sort of Christmas story at which Brooks was to excel over the years.



The 1916 Christmas issue of The Nelson Lee Library. Brooks was a regular contributor to the popular paper.

July 1917 brought a quite drastic change in the contents of the paper. In the previous issue (No 111), Lee had roused the wrath of a Chinese secret society known as The Fu Chang Tong, eventually seeking sanctuary at St Frank's School, where he assumed the identity of a missing housemaster, Peter Alvington, while Nipper became new boy, 'Dick Bennett'. In an epilogue to the story, Nipper asks Lee for permission to write up some of their adventures at St Frank's, so turning *The Nelson Lee Library* from a detective story paper to a school story paper.

Whoever's decision it was to make the change, it was certainly a sound one. Lee and Nipper's 'six-month stay' lasted for eighteen years, the last two in *The Gem* following its merger with *The Nelson Lee Library*. Every story was written by Brooks, who created a whole new set of characters for the series. And, like Frank Richards' 'Billy Bunter' stories in *The Magnet*, Brooks school yarns were written as series. These usually comprised eight



Brooks' 'St Frank's' stories were so popular that they were reissued separately in *The Monster Library*.

separate weekly stories, each complete in itself but closely linked with the one preceding it. However, Brooks' stories were very different in style to the 'Greyfriars' tales, being much more pacy and action-packed. He liked to introduce science fiction elements into his yarns. The St Frank's boys' were always travelling the world during

their school holidays, and they frequently discovered lost races, prehistoric monsters and hidden worlds in the course of their wanderings!

Throughout the early 1920s, Brooks had very much of a free hand in deciding the plots of his stories for *The Nelson Lee Library*, and he made full use of the opportunity. He had his own weekly column entitled 'Between Ourselves', in which he answered queries sent in by readers. This undoubtedly helped to hold the interest of older readers, who stayed loyal to the paper years after they would normally have given up school stories.

POPULARITY

By 1925, the paper was at its peak, although it is impossible to know what the circulation was at that time. However, its popularity is indicated by the launching of *The Monster Library* in November 1925. This was a very large-format monthly publication of 128 pages, each issue containing a complete series of stories from *The Nelson Lee Library*, edited to form a continuous narrative. The first issue, entitled *The Schoolboy Treasure Seekers*, drew on stories that had first appeared in 1918.

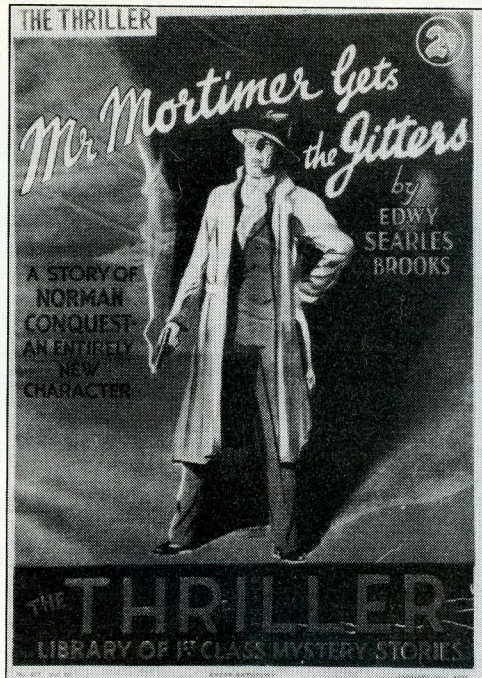
In his 'Between Ourselves' column, Brooks stated that he was always receiving requests from readers for old copies of the paper containing earlier adventures, and that *The Monster Library* was an attempt to fulfil this demand. It was a very well-produced monthly, with large, clear print and beautifully-painted, full-colour covers by Valda. However, its relatively high cover price of one shilling seems to have prevented it from achieving a large circulation, and it lasted for only



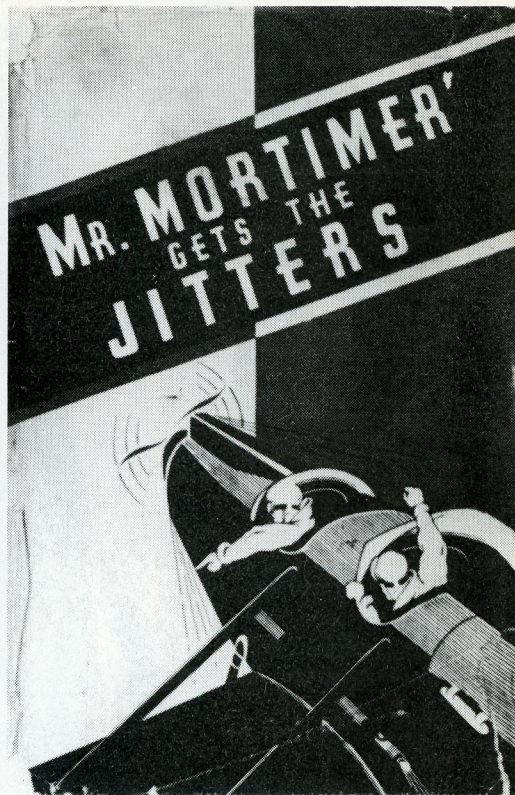
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ABOVE: Norman Conquest debuted in *The Thriller*, in an adventure entitled 'Mr Mortimer Gets the Jitters'. RIGHT: This subsequently became the title-story of the first 'Conquest' book, which now fetches up to £25.



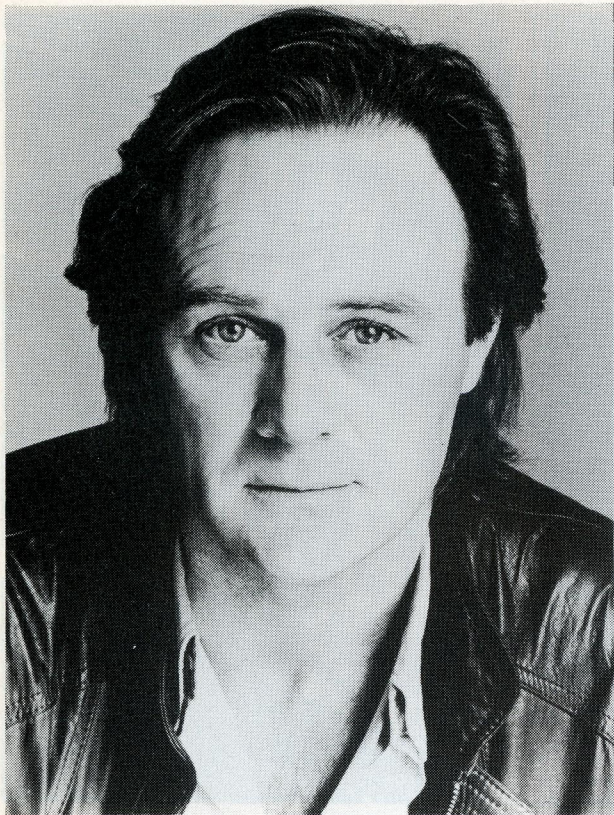
nineteen issues. Copies are now extremely scarce and are highly-prized by collectors.

However, the 'St Frank's' tales were so popular that other Amalgamated Press boys' papers began publishing them. Some, like those in *The Popular*, were reprints, while others — such as those in *The Nugget 3d Library* and *Boys Realm* — were new stories written by Brooks and other authors. Brooks wrote a series of tales featuring 'The Blue Crusaders', the football team local to St Frank's, for *Boys Realm of Sport and Adventure*, and these were later reprinted in *The Boys' Friend Library*, a publication which published many stories by Brooks over the years, including a few especially written for it.

The late 1920s brought editorial changes at the Amalgamated Press and Brooks found that he had less freedom to choose his own plots. As a consequence, he began to lose enthusiasm for the series. *The Nelson Lee*

Library had undergone a format change in May 1926 when it had been slightly enlarged. (Subsequent issues are known as the 'First New Series'.) There were further changes in 1930 when the 'St Frank's' stories were drastically reduced in length to make space for a long detective story, written by Brooks under his old 'Robert W. Comrade' pen-name (the 'Second New Series'). By 1932, reprints were being used in place of new stories.

Neither Brooks nor his readers were happy with this situation, and the circulation started to fall drastically. There were yet more changes in early 1933 (the 'Third New Series'), when the paper began reprinting the very earliest 'St Frank's' stories, beginning with 'Nipper at St Frank's', which had originally appeared in 1917 and was now reprinted as 'Nipper — New Boy'. These reprints lasted for about six months before *The Nelson Lee Library* was finally amalgamated with *The Gem* in 1933.



Christopher Cazenove plays *Conquest* in the BBC's radio adaptations of the stories.

to the plots being rather cumbersome and he soon gave up this idea.

In 1918, he had introduced a new adversary for Sexton Blake named Waldo the Wonderman, an abnormally strong man who could endure the most agonising deprivations with equanimity. Waldo began life as a thoroughly unpleasant fellow with few, if any, saving graces. Over the years, however, Brooks changed his character until, by the 1930s, he was something of a Robin Hood, insofar as he robbed ruthless, unpleasant people — although he always kept a good percentage of the profits for himself!

Brooks also wrote for *The Dixon Hawke Library*, published by D.C. Thomson. Like Blake, Hawke was in the classic 'Sherlock Holmes' mould.

After the demise of *The Nelson Lee Library*, there was a decline in Brooks' output, particularly for the

St Frank's survived as a serial in *The Gem* until the end of 1935. One final original 'St Frank's' story appeared in the 1936 *Greyfriars Holiday Annual*, and a longer tale, 'The Schemer of St Frank's', was published in the *Boys Friend* in June 1934.

Although no new 'St Frank's' stories were penned by Brooks, the old stories continued to be reprinted regularly in the monthly *Schoolboys' Own Library* until the demise of that paper, together with a host of others, in 1940. A few abridged 'St Frank's' tales were serialised in *Film Fun* in 1961.

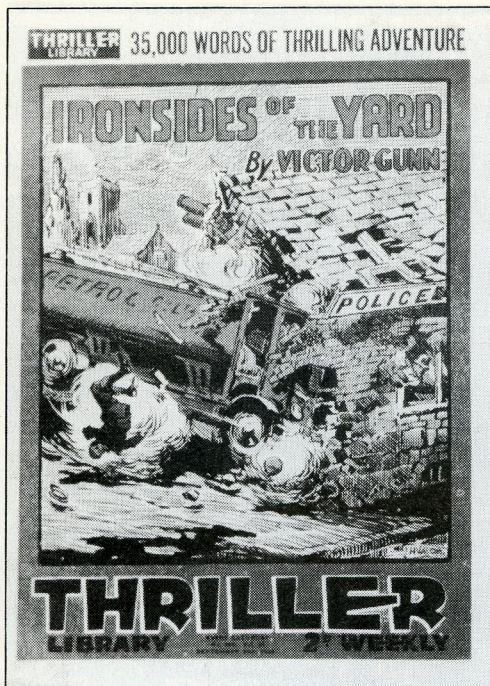
The 1920's were busy years for Brooks. His prolific pen was not only producing a weekly 'St Frank's' story, but also a large number of 'Sexton Blake' detective yarns for *The Union Jack*. He had first written for this paper in 1912, and by 1920 he was a well-established contributor. In some of the early issues, he introduced Nelson Lee, but this led

to the juvenile market. He continued to write detective stories for several weeklies, but concentrated on entering the hardback book market. His first work in this field was a rather mediocre western, *Ghost Gold*, written under the name, 'Robert W. Comrade', and published by Rich & Cowan in 1935 (reprinted 1937). Next came two detective stories by 'Edwy Searles Brooks', *The Strange Case of the Antlered Man* and *The Grouser Investigates*, published by Harrap in 1935 and 1936 respectively. In later years, Brooks recalled that he was not entirely happy working for Harrap, as they had returned his second novel for revision and had insisted that he tone down the character of his detective, 'The Grouser'. All three of these early novels are scarce, even though each of them was reprinted.

In early 1937, Brooks created one of his most enduring characters — Norman Conquest. Conquest was a desperado along



A mouthwatering selection of 'Norman Conquest' first editions, all of them published under the pseudonym, 'Berkeley Gray'. The earliest titles from 1938 to 1941 sell for £20-£30 in Very Good condition with the dustjackets.



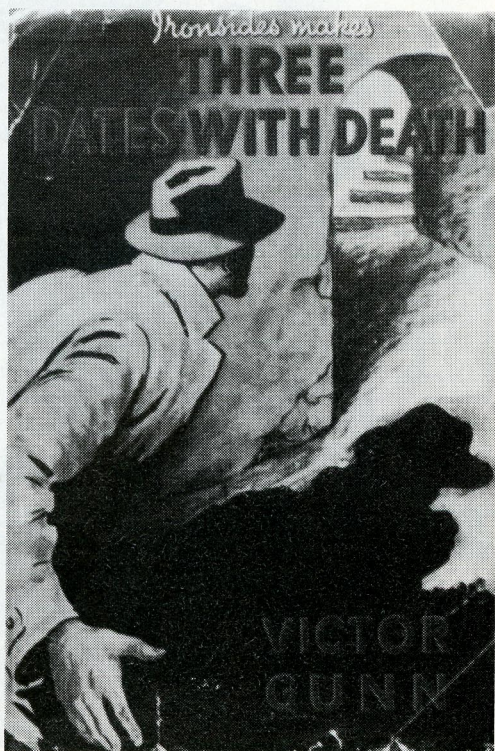
The Thriller saw the debut of Brooks' other major character: William 'Ironsides' Cromwell of the Yard.

similar lines to 'The Baron' and 'The Saint', characters who were extremely popular in the 1930s and '40s. Brooks' earlier character, Waldo the Wonderman, created nearly twenty years earlier, was the embryo from which Norman Conquest sprang. The first story, 'Mr Mortimer Gets the Jitters', appeared in *The Thriller* during January 1936. Together with two further stories, 'The Room Upstairs' and 'Sabotage', this was published in book form by Collins in 1938 as *Mr Mortimer Gets the Jitters*. A further two dozen or so 'Conquest' stories were published in *The Thriller*, and these were later reprinted in book form. Apart from the first *Thriller* story, all of the 'Norman Conquest' adventures were published under the pseudonym, 'Berkeley Gray'.

The first story found Conquest recently returned from a period abroad. Within a few chapters, he had met Joy Everard, who was to be his partner in all his subsequent adventures, and later his wife. Brooks showed great skill in developing the main characters,

and he succeeded in keeping the stories well up to date. Conquest was fond of fast cars and fancy gadgets. In the early stories, his abode was unique, being built into three old railway arches. Brooks later moved him to a penthouse, complete with swimming pool, roof garden and laboratory. This was situated on top of 'Conquest Court', a handsome building in the best part of London, owned by Conquest and paid for with the proceeds of his unlawful exploits.

The Thriller came to an end in 1940, but Brooks continued writing 'Conquest' novels. The character's escapades nearly always brought him into conflict with the law, usually in the personage of Bill Williams, who — though unable to lay Conquest by the heels — did eventually succeed in gaining promotion. This was possibly due to the number of villains Conquest laid at his feet!



However, most of his adventures were written for book publication. This one from 1947 now fetches up to £15.

Another character who featured in the early stories was Manderville Livingstone, an ex-tramp who was to Conquest what Hoppy Uniatz was to Simon Templar. Mandy, as he was more often called, drove a Lambretta and often arrived in the nick of time to help his boss out of a tight corner. Brooks tended to use Mandy less frequently in later years, and he is almost entirely absent from the last dozen or so stories.

The last 'Norman Conquest' story to be written by Brooks — prophetically entitled *Curtains for Conquest?* — was published by Collins in 1966. After his death, his son, Lionel, produced two more titles in the series, *Conquest Calls the Tune* (1968) and *Conquest in Ireland* (1969), the latter in collaboration with the author's widow, Frances. Both books were published by Robert Hale.

Norman Conquest was, and is, extremely popular. Apart from a few of the later titles, all of his adventures were reprinted in cheap editions. Most of the pre-1950 books were also published as 'White Circle' paperbacks. Others were reprinted in paperback by Fontana, Four Square and Five Star. In 1954, *Dare-Devil Conquest* was made into a film entitled *Park Plaza 605*, starring Tom Conway as Conquest, Jay Sheldon as Pixie and Sid James as Superintendent Bill Williams. It was a pretty poor effort.

In 1939, Brooks created another very popular character, Chief Inspector William Cromwell of Scotland Yard, known to his friends and enemies as 'Ironsides'. Together with his assistant, Detective Sergeant Johnny Lister, he featured in 43 novels, all written by Brooks under the pen-name of 'Victor Gunn'. Ironsides was a cynical, shabbily-dressed character whose unkempt appearance belied his astute mind. He contrasted well with his dapper assistant.

'Ironsides' stories had appeared in *The Thriller* just prior to the war, but thereafter most were published in book form. Many of the early stories were reworkings of Brooks' 'Sexton Blake' plots, and I have seen manuscripts of these old tales with margin notes by Brooks adapting them for use as 'Ironsides' adventures.

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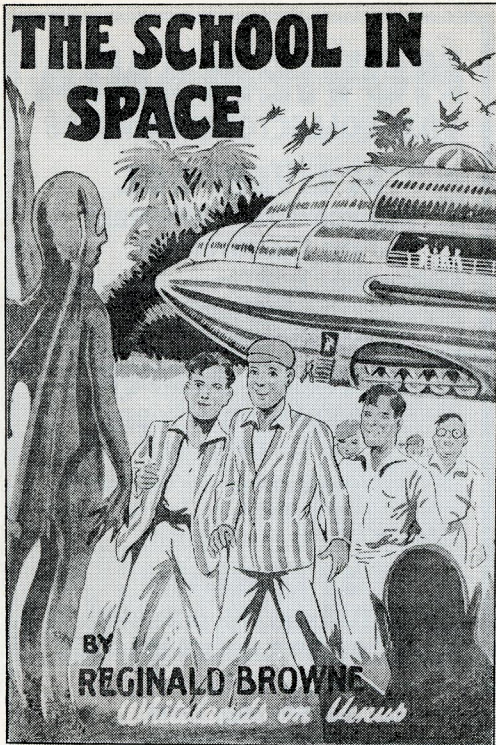
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The School in Space was one of a handful of stories which Brooks wrote for Gerald Swan Ltd in the 1940s.

Like the 'Norman Conquest' stories, the 'Ironsides' books were published by Collins. They appeared at the rate of one or two a year, up to and including 1966. Most were reprinted in cheap editions, and practically all of the early titles appeared as 'White Circle' paperbacks. In the late 1960s, a number of them were reprinted by Ulvercroft in 'Large Print' editions.

During the 1940s, Brooks also wrote short stories and novels for the firm of Gerald Swan Ltd (see BMC 89). Most of these were school stories written under the pseudonyms 'Reginald Browne' and 'Edward Thornton'. Probably the best of these was the novel *The School in Space*, published in 1947 and later reprinted.

The same firm also published two thrillers which Brooks wrote under the pen-name 'Carleton Ross'. Entitled *The Black Skull Murders* (1942) and *Racketeers of the Turf* (1947),

these were well below the standard of the 'Ironsides' and 'Norman Conquest' stories.

Edwy Searles Brooks died on 2nd December 1965, at the age of 76. He discussed his working methods in a radio interview given not long before his death. He was a methodical man, working out the plots of his stories in detail before dictating them to his wife. He hardly ever revised his work. He kept a carbon copy of every story he wrote, and these show very few corrections.

PROLIFIC

E.S. Brooks was one of our most prolific writers. Much of his early work was anonymous or written under a variety of pen-names. The fact that so much of his output is now attributed to him is mainly due to the lifelong interest of the late Robert Blythe, who published a bibliography of E.S. Brooks' work in 1963. In 1971, after being allowed access to the author's personal files, he issued a revised edition. This comprised 72 A4 pages, 58 of them covering Brooks' writings, and the rest being devoted to St Frank's School plus a list of serials and free gifts that had appeared in *The Nelson Lee Library*. As Blythe wrote in the preface: "[Here] you will find recorded 99% (and possibly more) of all the stories E.S.B. ever wrote."

In 1995, a third edition was issued by Mark Caldicott. While substantially the same as the 1971 version, this revised edition incorporated additional information supplied by Mark Caldicott, Bill Lofts and the present writer.

Thankfully, there are now several dealers who specialise in *The Nelson Lee Library*, *Union Jack* and *The Thriller*. Brooks' hardback books turn up quite often on dealers' lists, although jacketed firsts of the earlier titles are now very scarce. Some of the later works were never reprinted, and these are also hard to find. Fortunately, the best titles from Brooks' peak period — the late 1930s through to about 1950 — were often reissued, and it is possible to build up a collection of these books quite easily and cheaply. Brooks certainly repays the effort, and fans of John Creasey and Leslie Charteris will find much to enjoy in the thrilling adventures of 'Ironsides' of the Yard and the indefatigable Norman Conquest.

EDWY SEARLES BROOKS UK BIBLIOGRAPHY

A guide to current values of first editions in Very
Good condition without/with dustjackets.

'NORMAN CONQUEST' BOOKS (as 'BERKELEY GRAY')

MR MORTIMER GETS THE JITTERS (Collins, 1938)	£8-£10 (£20-£25)
VULTURES LTD (Collins, 1938)	£8-£10 (£20-£25)
MISS DYNAMITE (Collins, 1939)	£8-£10 (£20-£25)
CONQUEST MARCHES ON (Collins, 1939)	£8-£10 (£20-£25)
LEAVE IT TO CONQUEST (Collins, 1939)	£8-£10 (£20-£25)
CONQUEST TAKES ALL (Collins, 1940)	£8-£10 (£20-£25)
SIX TO KILL (Collins, 1940)	£8-£10 (£20-£25)
MEET THE DON (Collins, 1940)	£10-£12 (£25-£30)
CONVICT 1066 (Collins, 1940)	£10-£12 (£25-£30)
THANK YOU MR CONQUEST (Collins, 1941)	£10-£12 (£25-£30)
SIX FEET OF DYNAMITE (Collins, 1941)	£4-£6 (£12-£15)
BLONDE FOR DANGER (Collins, 1943)	£4-£6 (£12-£15)
THE GAY DESPERADO (Collins, 1944)	£4-£6 (£12-£15)
CAVALIER CONQUEST (Collins, 1944)	£4-£6 (£12-£15)
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MR BALL OF FIRE (Collins, 1946)	£4-£6 (£12-£15)
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THE CONQUEST TOUCH (Collins, 1948)	£4-£6 (£12-£15)
DUAL MURDER (Collins, 1949)	£4-£6 (£12-£15)
SEVEN DAWNS TO DEATH (Collins, 1950)	£4-£6 (£12-£15)
DARE-DEVIL CONQUEST (Collins, 1950)	£4-£6 (£12-£15)
CONQUEST IN SCOTLAND (Collins, 1951)	£2-£4 (£8-£12)
OPERATION CONQUEST (Collins, 1951)	£2-£4 (£8-£12)
THE LADY IS POISON (Collins, 1952)	£2-£4 (£8-£12)
THE HALF OPEN DOOR (Collins, 1953)	£2-£4 (£8-£12)
TARGET FOR CONQUEST (Collins, 1953)	£2-£4 (£8-£12)
CONQUEST GOES WEST (Collins, 1954)	£2-£4 (£8-£12)
FOLLOW THE LADY (Collins, 1954)	£2-£4 (£8-£12)
TURN LEFT FOR DANGER (Collins, 1955)	£2-£4 (£8-£12)
THE HOUSE OF THE LOST (Collins, 1956)	£2-£4 (£8-£12)

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In Next Month's Issue

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Booker Winner PAT BARKER

BLUE-BLOODED MURDER

Romantic Poet SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

JOCELYN BROOKE Novelist

CONQUEST IN COMMAND (Collins, 1956)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
CONQUEST GOES HOME (Collins, 1957)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
CONQUEST AFTER MIDNIGHT (Collins, 1957)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
DEATH ON THE HIT PARADE (Collins, 1958)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
CONQUEST IN CALIFORNIA (Collins, 1959)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
MURDER AND CO (Collins, 1959)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
THE BIG BRAIN (Collins, 1960)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
CONQUEST ON THE RUN (Collins, 1960)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
NIGHTMARE HOUSE (Collins, 1960)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
GET READY TO DIE (Collins, 1961)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
CALL CONQUEST FOR DANGER (Collins, 1962)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
CONQUEST IN THE UNDERWORLD (Collins, 1963)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
COUNTDOWN FOR CONQUEST (Collins, 1963)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
CASTLE CONQUEST (Collins, 1964)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
CONQUEST OVERBOARD (Collins, 1964)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
CALAMITY CONQUEST (Collins, 1965)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
CONQUEST LIKES IT HOT (Collins, 1965)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
CURTAINS FOR CONQUEST (Collins, 1966)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
CONQUEST CALLS THE TUNE (written by Brooks' widow, Frances, and son, Lionel) (Robert Hale, 1968)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
CONQUEST IN IRELAND (written by Brooks' son, Lionel) (Robert Hale, 1969)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)

'IRONSIDES OF THE YARD' BOOKS (as 'VICTOR GUNN')

FOOTSTEPS OF DEATH (Collins, 1939)	£10-£12	(£25-£30)
IRONSIDES OF THE YARD (Collins, 1940)	£10-£12	(£25-£30)
IRONSIDES SMASHES THROUGH (Collins, 1940)	£10-£12	(£20-£30)
DEATH'S DOORWAY (Collins, 1941)	£6-£8	(£15-£20)
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MAD HATTERS ROCK (Collins, 1942)	£4-£6	(£12-£15)
IRONSIDES SEES RED (Collins, 1943)	£4-£6	(£12-£15)
THE DEAD MAN LAUGHS (Collins, 1944)	£4-£6	(£12-£15)
NICE DAY FOR A MURDER (Collins, 1945)	£4-£6	(£12-£15)
IRONSIDES SMELLS BLOOD (Collins, 1946)	£4-£6	(£12-£15)
DEATH ON SHIVERING SANDS (Collins, 1945)	£4-£6	(£12-£15)
THREE DATES WITH DEATH (Collins, 1947)	£4-£6	(£12-£15)
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DEAD MAN'S WARNING (Collins, 1949)	£4-£6	(£12-£15)
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THE BORGIA HEAD MYSTERY (Collins, 1951)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
MURDER ON ICE (Collins, 1951)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
DEATH COMES LAUGHING (Collins, 1952)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
THE BODY VANISHES (Collins, 1952)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
THE WHISTLING KEY (Collins, 1953)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
THE CROOKED STAIRCASE (Collins, 1954)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
THE CRIPPLED CANARY (Collins, 1954)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
THE LAUGHING GRAVE (Collins, 1955)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
THE PAINTED DOG (Collins, 1955)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
DEAD MAN'S BELL (Collins, 1956)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
CASTLE DANGEROUS (Collins, 1957)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
THE GOLDEN MONKEY (Collins, 1957)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
THE 64 THOUSAND MURDER (Collins, 1958)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
THE TREBLE CHANCE MURDER (Collins, 1958)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
DEAD IN A DITCH (Collins, 1959)	£2-£4	(£8-£12)
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