

Winston's Spy

by Robert Webber

Published by Troubador, 370 pages,
paperback £14.99

Robert Webber's tense thriller, set on the very volcano-edge of the Second World War, brings us the story of Alex Carlton, recruited by Military Intelligence to undertake a dangerous mission to the far-flung frozen wastes of Finland.

A country whose wartime role has often been overlooked by novelists and historians, the Finnish nation proved itself – as a small country – to be remarkably courageous at challenging and repelling its more powerful and menacing Soviet neighbour (at a time when the Nazis and Soviets were bound by a non-aggression pact). It is to Robert Webber's credit that he has adjusted our focus, away from the usual theatre of warfare in Western Europe, to the Baltic and Russian front.

The author is entering an already crowded market, with so many classics on the bookshelves concerning espionage (from Frederick Forsyth to Robert Harris) – but we find in Webber an effective contender in the field; his writing evoking the feel of the immediate pre-war era and the twilight life of the secret agent. Institute members will relish such passages as:

“The sessions that Alex enjoyed most were with a chain-smoking, ex-Fleet Street journalist, who smelled consistently of stale alcohol, and who taught him how to say much in very few words. ‘Journalistic column inches reduce the revenue from advertisers – and advertisers pay your salary!’ was his maxim that he drummed into Alex's brain at every opportunity. Alex started to believe that, should he fail at everything else, a career in journalism was a possibility.”

The novel's hero then begins his journey through the secretive archipelago of London's intelligence networks but finds that the powers-that-be are not looking for any ordinary person, with a normal, personal life. He is soon advised that “girlfriends are an unnecessary complication” - that his relationship with Theodora is not in the best interests of the service, and that even her background must be scrutinised. The novel deals well with themes such as the stresses and strains of duty v. family; the tense, claustrophobic sub-world of the intelligence officer; the fate of the insecure, imperfect recruit taken away from everyday life and sucked inexorably into an unknown, anonymous mission.

Anyone addicted to the secret-service genre will be delighted to see the appearance of Robert Webber's new novel, the first instalment of his 'Carlton Chronicles', with its tantalising prospect of many more adventures to come. For the lead character, Alex, the next stop is either landfall on the Scandinavian coast – or oblivion at the bottom of the North Sea.

