CONCLUSION

When Edmund Burke, during the trial of Warren Hastings, exclaims, “God forbid it should be said that no nation under heaven equals the British in substantial violence and in formal justice” (Bond 1:10), he fires the opening salvo in the nineteenth-century struggle to reimagine British authority as essentially nonviolent. The project of reimagining authority as nonviolent through the idea of detection is shared by the diverse works discussed in this book: from Godwin’s and James Mill’s criticisms of imperial authority to the problems faced by anxious colonial administrators in solving the mysteries of Thuggee; from the nonthreatening methods of Dickens’s Bucket or Collins’s Cuff to Doyle’s and Kipling’s representations of Empire as intelligence work. The figure of the detective is one of the chief vehicles for this reimagining: The story of replacing violent with nonviolent power is his story, too. From turn-of-the-century associations of detection with spying to Peterloo-era fears of a paramilitary police, the figure of the detective had a long way to go before he could sit snugly in his armchair at Baker Street. This is not to say that the detective represents a check on the idea of British power. When W. O’Brien writes in the *Edinburgh Review* that the “soldier is necessarily a bad policeman” (1852, 10–11), he is not limiting the authority of the police (before whom, we recall from chapter 3, the mob would still quail), but rather reimagining it.

The Victorian era was a time of the consolidation of almost bewildering authority in terms of both domestic institutions and global influence. The field of Victorian Studies, if one can refer to such a diverse range of scholarship as a single field, has persuasively mapped out the operations of this power, from works inspired by Edward Said’s seminal *Orientalism* (1978) to D. A. Miller’s extraordinarily influential work on the Victorian novel, *The Novel and the Police* (1988). In the wake of persuasive applications of Foucault’s paradigm of power/knowledge and specifically his theory of
“panopticism,” and Miller’s as well, it has been easy to read nineteenth-century fiction as being at the center of, to use Miller’s term, a “carceral” society. The idea of panopticism has been particularly dominant in two areas of literary criticism: (1) readings of detective fiction and (2) readings of imperial literature. Indeed the Victorian detective, with gimlet gaze and myriad disguises, or his counterpart, the Victorian colonial administrator armed with maps and glossaries, would seem perfectly to demonstrate the rise of a kind of panoptical power in a carceral culture, whether at home or abroad. As I have been arguing throughout this book, however, we need to have a more nuanced understanding of the profound and confusing struggles that went along with conceiving and implementing such authority. If the marriage of benevolence and power embodied by Sherlock Holmes was as natural as the critical tradition would have us believe, the Great Detective would have been invented at the beginning of the nineteenth century and thus covered at the beginning, rather than at the ending, of a work on fictions of detection.

While we have read detective fiction and imperial literature similarly, we have read them separately.1 This has been my other aim in this book: to argue that nineteenth-century literature reveals how the administration of the British Empire and the development of the domestic detective depended on one another. I have wanted this work to be part of what David Cannadine describes as putting “the history of Britain back into the history of empire, and the history of the empire back into the history of Britain” (xx). We need to examine these now-familiar figures of the detective and the imperial explorer together in their proper global context, the “vast, interconnected world” in which the detective is brought to life amidst anxieties about increasing imperial power and the imperial explorer is shaped by domestic ideas about power.2 It is particularly important because, as we have seen, these two figures at times seem to tell the opposite story of a world more aptly characterized as “us versus them.” But what these two figures together reveal is how the acquisition of local knowledge, whether gathered in the back alleys of London or Lahore, destabilizes the rigid understanding of place that the panopticon turned into architecture. The detective figure shows us how constant forays into the peripheries define and continually redefine the center, giving the Victorian nation that the detective comes to represent a more contingent identity than we have heretofore allowed. By situating the figure of the detective in this vast, interconnected world, rather than as the homegrown gatekeeper of a narrowly envisioned metropolitan center, we restore to detective fiction the critique of authority out of which it first came. It was a critique, we have seen, from all sides of the political spectrum: from radical Godwin to Utilitarian Mill to complex conservatives in Doyle and Kipling.
Reading the history of detective fiction as a history of skepticism about authority questions one of the most pervasive critical assumptions about the genre: that, to paraphrase Miller, detective fiction performs a simplification of power, or, to quote Franco Moretti, that detective fiction is “liberalism’s executioner” (155).3

The lesson of Detecting the Nation is that the demands of an imperial world called the English detective reluctantly into being but that in detecting that imperial nation he made the Empire part of what it meant to be English in the Victorian period. This is also the lesson of John Buchan’s The Thirty-Nine Steps, a reading of which will conclude this book. The Thirty-Nine Steps can be read as a minihistory of the detective, from his origins as a criminal, vaguely foreign outsider to his ultimate place as embodiment of English law and order. Buchan’s novel, however, has traditionally been read not as a detective story but rather as one of the first spy thrillers. Appearing in 1915, around the same time as many of the generically challenged Holmes stories discussed in the previous chapter, The Thirty-Nine Steps is an example par excellence of both the critical tendency to see stories about imperial intrigue as altogether different from stories of domestic detection, as well as my point that these two genres are in fact the same story about what authority can and should look like in an age of Empire. The Thirty-Nine Steps tells the story of how an imperial outsider, Richard Hannay, a restless young mining engineer recently returned to England from South Africa, becomes an Englishman and learns to detect impostors in a world in which national identity appears to be a masquerade. As detective fiction demonstrated throughout the long nineteenth century, distinguishing between the center and the margin is almost impossible, a point underscored in a conversation between Hannay and a fellow countryman: “D’you think that adventure is found only in the tropics . . . Maybe you’re rubbing shoulders with it at this moment.” “That’s what Kipling says,” his companion agrees (22). That Kipling would be an expert on adventures in the British countryside is the very situation that gives rise to the English detective and now to Richard Hannay.

**Richard Hannay Detects the Nation**

In his introduction to The Thirty-Nine Steps, Alan Weissman suggests that “the author found the exact recipe for an emerging genre and with it created a perfect instance of the type” (iii), a type called by many titles, from espionage and suspense to, in Buchan’s own words, a “shocker” (v). Early in Buchan’s novel, an innkeeper who hears Hannay’s story of international intrigue draws “his
breath in sharply” and whispers “By God! . . . it is all pure Rider Haggard and Conan Doyle” (22). The “literary innkeeper,” as Buchan calls him, knows what literary tradition has forgotten: The imperial adventure stories of Haggard and domestic detective stories of Conan Doyle are not different types of stories but rather part of a seamless story about British power in the world. But much like the partition of Kipling from Doyle, Buchan’s novel is taken to illustrate the opposite: a seam. In a fascinating reading of the first Sherlock Holmes novella, *A Study in Scarlet*, Joseph McLaughlin talks about the difficulty critics have had reading the significant portion of the novel that takes place in a Mormon community in nineteenth-century America. McLaughlin argues that “we need to read the novel’s mixed generic quality as a clue to the novelist’s desire to tell a story for which there does not yet exist a seamless form” (38). I heartily share with McLaughlin the position that placing strict generic boundaries around the work of Doyle causes us to overlook the important cultural work the Holmes stories do. I would argue, however, that there already existed a seamless form: The nineteenth-century detective narrative has no borders. It is in the critical compartmentalization of Doyle, as well as writers like Buchan who are similarly read as inaugurating genres, that we are watching the seam being sewn. Writers like Kipling and Buchan are placed on the other side of that seam, which makes Buchan part of a different tradition, even though, as Weissman later writes in the introduction, “The Thirty-Nine Steps also owes much to the crime fiction of the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly that of Arthur Conan Doyle” (iii). My work in this book has been to show why the tradition of detective fiction should not be separated from the adventure/spy tradition and what we overlook when we do so. In my introduction I suggest that *Detecting the Nation* is an attempt to address three questions I felt were not adequately explained in existing accounts of detective fiction: (1) how the threateningly foreign police become English; (2) how accepting the police facilitates an acceptance of imperial authority; and (3) how the margin comes to define the center. *The Thirty-Nine Steps* will help me to address these questions one last time.

Certainly, there is much superficial evidence in Buchan’s novel to prove his debt to Doyle and the continuity of his work with Victorian fictions of detection. Buchan’s chapter titles sound like the titles of Holmes stories, such as “The Adventure of the Radical Candidate” and “The Adventure of the Bald Archaeologist.” Like Holmes, Hannay spends some smoke-filled sleepless nights puzzling out the case (25) and even draws the comparison indirectly: “I wasn’t any kind of Sherlock Holmes. But I have always fancied I had a kind of instinct about questions like this” (74). Hannay, like our earlier detective figures, Caleb Williams and Gabriel Betteredge, comes down with a strong
case of “detective fever” in which “an abominable restlessness had taken possession of me” (67). While Hannay seems at home in the family of English detectives, what is even more important is the point that Buchan is careful to make: Hannay is not a spy. While many critics see The Thirty-Nine Steps as a defining moment in the emergence of the spy novel, Hannay is much more accurately understood as a detective. Buchan, nodding to the detective’s early struggles to disassociate himself from the French figure of the spy, has Royer, a Frenchman, describe “the habits of the spy.” Saying that “we in France know something of the breed,” Royer describes the spy as someone who “receives personally his reward, and he delivers personally his intelligence” (73). Hannay’s interest is never strictly personal; his self-centered, Holmes-like ennui quickly wears off as Scudder, the man whom he had been harboring, is murdered. As Hannay decodes the international mysteries in Scudder’s little black book and runs from the murderers, his motive becomes far more about the security of his country than of himself.

But even as Hannay strives to save England, he does not initially identify with England. As he questions his own Englishness, he questions the very presumption of any kind of natural English identity in a time when, in the heart of London, “a lot of Imperialist ladies asked me to tea to meet schoolmasters from New Zealand and editors from Vancouver” (1). “The talk of the ordinary Englishman made me sick,” explains Hannay, who “had been three months in the Old Country, and was fed up with it” (1). Having made his “pile” in South Africa, Hannay is back in England. But “my father had brought me out from Scotland at the age of six, and I had never been home since; so England was a sort of Arabian Nights to me” (1). Fictions of detection have been at pains to make the detective English: Godwin’s attempt to show a natural English instinct for truth and curiosity in Caleb’s “unadorned tale” becomes Dickens’s representation of the homegrown virtues of his detective police; Collins uses the old English rose as the symbol of his detective, Cuff; Holmes famously retires from his bohemian Baker Street to a life of beekeeping in the English countryside. The task of The Thirty-Nine Steps, like the process dramatized in detective fiction over the long nineteenth century, is to make an Englishman out of the alienated Hannay. As the novel goes on, Hannay finds himself back in England and begins to relax:

After Scotland the air smelt heavy and flat, but infinitely sweet, for the limes and chestnuts and lilac bushes were domes of blossom. . . . Somehow the place soothed me and put me at my ease. I fell to whistling as I looked into the green depths, and the tune which came to my Lips was “Annie Laurie” . (58–59)
Hannay is literally saved by his native landscape when his car smashes into the bed of a stream, “but a branch of hawthorn got me in the chest, lifted me up and held me, while a ton or two of expensive metal slipped below me” (29).

While finding the British countryside comforting is something Hannay shares with nineteenth-century detectives, finding it full of a confusing imperial presence is something *The Thirty-Nine Steps* shares with Victorian detective fiction. As Dickens’s detective anecdotes and Collins’s *The Moonstone* turned England into the Empire before the eyes of the necessary detective, Hannay, too, constantly sees the imperial periphery at home. A little railroad station in Scotland “reminded me of one of those forgotten little stations in the Karroo” (17); elsewhere Sir Harray tells Hannay that “you can put a week among the shepherds, and be as safe as if you were in New Guinea” (34).

What the detective has taught us through his own transformation is that national identity is not an essential quality, but something more like a masquerade; it is at once recognizable and unstable. Which is why it is something the detective can wear, as Hannay does here: “when I left that cottage I was the living image of the kind of Scotsman you see in the illustrations to Burns’s poems” (56).

In Hannay, then, we have a character who underscores the precarious struggle involved in the production of national identity. Being English does not come naturally to this child of the veld, but he understands how to wear it as a disguise. Rather than suggesting a cynical understanding of national identity, however, Buchan here shows that through being a detective literally on the margins of English society, Hannay comes to understand what it really means to be English. His representation of Hannay as a detective draws from those of the writers discussed in this work. First, he is recognizable to and respectful of the average Briton. Even though Hannay is wanted as the Portland Place murderer, many locals overlook this as they choose to trust him instead. Like Gabriel Betteredge who says, “I couldn’t help liking the Sergeant—though I hated him all the time” (Wilkie Collins 200), a bystander helps out Hannay after a car crash explaining only moments after meeting him, “You’re the right sort of fellow” (29). Hannay later reflects, “Obviously Sir Walter believed in me, though why he did I could not guess” (60). Hannay returns the favor and sounds the same trusting, reassuring tone as Bucket and Cuff before him: “Listen Sir Harry, I’ve got something pretty important to say to you. You’re a good fellow and I’m going to be frank” (32). Hannay relies on locals because he understands what Mill’s ideal legislator, Colonel Sleeman, Inspector Bucket, Sergeant Cuff, Holmes, Strickland, and Creighton understood before him: the importance of local knowledge. Being almost a stranger to his “home,” he understands that “my lack of local knowledge might very well be
my undoing” (45). He understands that the detective does not have panopti-
cal vision; to do his work he must trust in multiple sources of local knowledge,
such as in the conclusion when Hannay gets a crucial piece of information
about the “thirty-nine steps” from a local coastguard man. His own colonial
knowledge is just another form of that local knowledge and his expertise here,
like that of *The Moonstone*’s Murthwaite, comes in just as handy in the met-
ropolitan center. Not only does his colonial experience (from knife tricks to
hunting stories) allow him to engage and impress his many helpers, but the
skills honed on the imperial periphery enable Hannay to survive and save the
English nation: “Now my life on the veld has given me the eyes of a kite, and
I can see things for which most men need a telescope” (36).

While Hannay might have unusual abilities, Buchan insists on an almost
nostalgic nonviolence in his representation of the detective. Hannay is no
James Bond, master of technology and weaponry, a point made obvious in
having him pursued by cutting-edge technology circa 1915—an aeroplane—
while he has only his legs and, for a brief time, a bicycle to elude capture. No
one is hurt when Hannay blows up the residence of the “Bald Archaeologist”
who is holding him captive. Recalling the lesson that a soldier is necessarily a
bad policeman, Hannay comments at the end, as he is about to go join the
fight in World War I, that “I had done my best service . . . before I put on
khaki” (88, my emphasis).

Through local knowledge, nonviolence, and a respect bordering on love for
the inhabitants and landscape of his native Britain, we see how the foreign
figure of Hannay becomes not only part of his country, but its only hope. As
*The Thirty-Nine Steps* shows the figure of the detective to be a product of both
the imperial periphery and the metropolitan center, it also shows a successful
marriage of both skepticism about and faith in authority. Initially, Hannay,
like the reader, wonders whom he can trust and the question of the character
of British authority is put into play. “My first impulse had been to write a let-
ter to the Prime Minister, but a little reflection convinced me that that would
be useless” (28). Crucially, Hannay is equally on the run from the British
police, who want him for the murder, and from the Black Stone, the enemies
of the British state. As the novel goes on, and as Hannay begins to embody
more and more of the characteristics of the traditional detective, he begins to
“think wistfully of the police . . . They at any rate were fellow-countrymen
and honest men, and their tender mercies would be kinder than these ghoul-
ish aliens” (49–50). By the final chapters of the novel, Hannay is literally
team ed with Scotland Yard (74), and when asked by the three members of
the Black Stone, who are impersonating proper Englishmen, “Where do you
come from?” he answers, “Scotland Yard” (83–84).
The story of the detective in the nineteenth century has shown us how the margins come to define the center. *The Thirty-Nine Steps* shows us this literally in having a mining engineer gradually work his way from South Africa to Scotland to England to prospect for truth at the heart of the nation. But *The Thirty-Nine Steps* demonstrates the more serious theoretical implications of this trajectory as well. Buchan’s novel is no less than a theory of national identity in a world defined by masquerade. If the concept of panopticism suggests that power can be characterized by the figure of the guard who safely scans the periphery from an invisible point in the center, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* turns this formulation on its head. Since its origins at the end of the eighteenth century, detective fiction has examined new ways of seeing in a world in which the relationship between seeing and knowing is radically destabilized. In *Caleb Williams*, Falkland appears to be the very model of a kindhearted master, but Caleb learns otherwise and must flee, Hannay-like, through the wilds of his native land, in order to get at the plain truth. Colonel Sleeman and Captain Taylor are at once flummoxed and entranced by the deception of the Thugs. While Bucket has near-omniscient powers of seeing, the world of *Bleak House* is one in which a lifelong London resident, Snagsby, can scarcely believe what he is seeing when he accompanies the detective to Tom-all-alone’s and Lady Dedlock, disguised as a streetwoman, manages to elude Bucket. *The Moonstone* stages this very problem between seeing and knowing in its reenactment of the drug-induced theft of the diamond, and Watson continually inhabits the same problem as he meets an opium addict or a drunken groom only to find that he is in fact Holmes in disguise. The ne plus ultra of the difficult relationship between knowing and seeing is the famous passage near the end of *Kim*:

He tried to think of the lama . . . but the bigness of the world . . . swept linked thought aside. Then he looked upon the trees and the broad fields . . . looked with strange eyes unable to take up the size and proportion, and use of things—stared for a still half-hour. All that while he felt, though he could not put it into words, that his soul was out of gear with its surroundings. (331)

The fantasy of both Empire and the police is that the colonizer or detective can see with “imperial eyes” and that seeing is tantamount to knowing and mastering. Indeed, after Kim’s momentary lapse, Kipling demonstrates this fantasy as Kim “felt the wheels of his being lock up anew on the world without. Things that rode meaningless on the eyeball an instant before slid into proper proportion” (331). Despite the fantasy of *Kim*, fictions of detection more often than not expose this as a fantasy as the detective’s world is the
murky reality of red herrings, disguise, counterfeiting and forgeries, mistaken identities and impersonations. Detectives, then, are not people who have panoptical vision—as we have seen, the vision of detectives is in fact as qualified in detective stories as it is celebrated—but who understand the precarious, even treacherous nature of what you see and how that, as in the example from Kim, relates to a precarious state of being.

As The Thirty-Nine Steps draws to a close and Hannay has tracked the three German members of the Black Stone to a tennis court on the English coast, he is puzzled by what appear to be “three ordinary, game-playing, suburban Englishmen” (80). Suddenly Hannay remembers the theory of old Peter Pienaar, “the best scout I ever knew,” who, like the nineteenth-century detective, was “pretty often on the windy side of the law . . . before he had turned respectable” (81). Hannay describes Peter’s theory that

if a man could get into perfectly different surroundings from those in which he had been first observed, and—this is the important part—really play up to these surroundings and behave as if he had never been out of them, he would puzzle the cleverest detectives on earth. (81)

Or be the cleverest detective on earth. For The Thirty-Nine Steps shows us how detective work is a metaphor for identity. Another “maxim of Peter’s,” Hannay discloses, is “if you are playing a part, you will never keep it up unless you convince yourself that you are it” (81). The detective, through his own transformation from outsider to insider over the nineteenth century, shows us how national identity is at once a part you play and a thing you become. The precarious nature of national identity is why the detective, someone who can detect impostors and police these constantly shifting borders, is necessary. If we allow ourselves to see the detective as a homegrown emanation of the metropolitan center, completely distinct from such other figures as the colonial explorer (or mining engineer), we overlook this important lesson about identity in the Victorian period. Hannay knows better, rubs his eyes, and takes another look. Putting detective fiction back into the vast, interconnected world that produced it asks us to do the same.