

## *The Mousetrap* Dramaturg's Notes

### Plot Synopsis

#### Act One

The play begins in Mollie and Giles Ralston's guest house, Monkswell Manor, which is an old British country house. This is a brand new business, taking in its first clients today. Also on this day, the radio is announcing that the police are looking for a murderer who killed a woman in London, and that there's going to be heavy snow fall.

The first guest arrives, introducing himself as Christopher Wren, an aspiring architect. He's an odd young man who takes an eclectic, though not sustained, interest in the furnishings, architecture, and Ralstons themselves. Mollie immediately sympathizes with him, though Giles dislikes him from the beginning. Next, Mrs. Boyle arrives, a severe matron who judges everything about Monkswell and the Ralstons with an extremely critical eye. Arriving at the same time is Major Metcalf, a jovial and helpful retired army officer. The last official guest to arrive is Miss Casewell, who is taciturn, sarcastic, and manly. As the registered guests are settling into their rooms, an unexpected person shows up in the form of Mr. Paravicini, a foreigner of indeterminate origin wearing makeup to make himself appear older. He claims his car has crashed into a snowbank and that he's seeking shelter, which the Ralstons provide.

Shortly after, Mollie answers a phone call from the police, informing her that they're sending an officer around. Mollie protests that he will not be able to get through because Monkswell is completely snowed in, but the police assure her that it won't be a problem. The Ralstons can't figure out what crime they've committed, though several of the guests seem nervous about the prospect of a police officer coming. Detective Sergeant Trotter arrives on skis, which he places in a cupboard before explaining the purpose of his visit. He is there to provide police protection and try to capture the person who murdered the woman in London. She and her late husband had owned Longridge Farm (a local farm) and had taken in the Corriganes, three children whom they abused, neglected, and starved until one of the children died. The police suspect that the oldest son of the three boys killed her for revenge, and that he's coming to Monkswell to murder two more people. The killer left/lost a notebook with the victim's address and Monkswell listed, and seems obsessed with the nursery rhyme "The Three Blind Mice," which suggests three intended victims total. Everyone staying at Monkswell denies any connection with Longridge Farm, and Trotter begins investigating. He leaves to inspect the house, at which point Metcalf reveals that he knows Mrs. Boyle was the magistrate who sent the children to Longridge Farm; she denies any responsibility because she was just doing her job. Everyone leaves the stage except Mrs. Boyle. A door opens behind her, a hand turns out the lights, turns up the volume on the radio, and we hear Mrs. Boyle being strangled. Mollie comes back on, turns on the lights and discovers Mrs. Boyle's dead body.

#### Act Two

Trotter has now shifted from trying to provide police protection to a murder inquiry. He tries to get any info he can from Mollie, but she doesn't seem to have much useful info. The bulk of the second act is spent with Trotter trying to get evidence and the rest of the characters resisting. Giles points the finger of suspicion at Christopher, who has a

somewhat hysterical reaction in which he accuses everyone of being against him. However, Mollie tries to defend him to Trotter, and they have an extended conversation in which they establish that Christopher of Giles could fit the general profile for the older Corrigan son, while Major Metcalf or Paravicini could be the children's lost father, and Caswell or Mollie herself could be the older sister. In other words, everyone is a suspect.

Throughout this act, there seem to be several recognitions and realizations, though until the end it isn't clear what they are. Also, the Ralstons become suspicious of one another because they learn that each had lied about being in London the day before. Giles suspects Mollie is having an affair with Christopher, while she thinks he could be the murderer.

At some point, Trotter discovers that his skis are missing, and suspicion initially falls on Christopher, who had told Mollie he might steal them to try and escape being framed for the murders. However, when he arrives without the skis, the entire party splits up to look for them. Trotter has a revelation and calls everyone back together with a plan to restage where each of them were at the time of Mrs. Boyle's murder, but with different people in each other's locations. He disperses each of them to their assigned location, prepares the room, and then calls Mollie back in. Trotter draws a gun and reveals that he's the murderer. He's the oldest brother, and he also blames Mollie for his brother's death because when she was their teacher he had sent her a letter asking for help, but she never responded. Mollie explains that she never got the letter, but Trotter is going to kill her anyway. As his hands close around her throat, Casewell and Metcalf come down the stairs. Casewell addresses him by his real name, Georgie, and reveals that she's his sister. She says she's going to take him to a facility where they'll help him, and the two of them exit. Metcalf reveals that he is actually a police officer and had been suspicious of Trotter from the beginning.

The play ends with Mollie and Giles reconciled from their suspicions when they reveal that they each went to London to buy an anniversary present for the other.

### Character Profiles

- Mollie Ralston: A newlywed in her (late) twenties, Mollie inherited Monkswell manor and seems to be the driving force behind turning it into a guest house. She is confident, though deeply shaped by regret over something in her past, which we learn late in the play is her role in the Longridge Farm case. She had been their teacher, and due to illness never received the letter from the youngest son asking for help. Mollie is sweet and sympathetic, instinctively wanting to help Christopher when suspicion of the murders falls on him. She is also devoted to her new husband, though Trotter is able to arouse her suspicions that he might be the murderer.
- Giles Ralston: Mollie's new husband. Somewhere in his thirties, though he appears on the older side. He is co-running Monkswell, though he's less enthusiastic about the business and dealing with guests. Something of a bro, he seems like a football star who never got over his high school glory days. He is somewhat patronizing and jealous in his relationship with Mollie. Giles intensely dislikes Christopher, suspecting him not only of being the murderer but of having an affair with Mollie. He also dislikes Mrs. Boyle (though so does seemingly everyone else), and he's critical of Casewell for her masculine presentation.

- Christopher Wren: An excitable, hyperactive, almost hysterical man in his twenties (though he seems on the young side). He is flighty and flits from subject to subject, taking an interest in a great many things, but never sustaining that focus very long. His physical appearance reflects his eccentricities, with long, messy hair and a knit tie that's uncharacteristically colorful for the 1950s. Potentially bisexual, Christopher shows some romantic interest in Mollie, but also expresses physical admiration for Trotter. Christopher shows a fascination for the morbid and the macabre. When Giles accuses him of being the murderer, he descends into a kind of hysterical paranoia, accusing everyone of trying to frame him for the murder. We do learn that Christopher Wren isn't his real name, but we do not learn his real name.
- Mrs. Boyle: An older woman, probably in her 50s-60s, Mrs. Boyle is a large and dominating presence, both physically and in terms of her personality. She is severe and judgemental, with very definite ideas about how things should properly be done. Not an aristocrat, she comes from that strata of the middle class with pretensions to aristocratic propriety, but without the self-assured ease of ancestral privilege. She had been a magistrate, and so she is used to rendering judgments, and she now lives out of hotels and guest houses, so she has definite standards—which she judges Mollie and Giles for not meeting. Mrs. Boyle was the magistrate who sent the children to Longridge Farm, and while she officially denies any responsibility for their fate, it's possible that she secretly blames herself.
- Major Metcalf: An older man, possibly in his 60s, the Major is a retired military officer. His bearing and posture should bear this out. The Major is helpful and cheery, perhaps reflecting a wartime spirit that would have been relatively recent in the collective memories of 1952. We do learn that he was stationed in Edinburgh when the Longridge Farm incident took place, so it's not clear whether he is a combat veteran who saw action during WWII. It's also possible he was deployed abroad earlier in his career, though, again, we don't know for sure. He is also inquisitive and observant, with an apparent interest in antiquities, which wasn't uncommon for military officers of his generation.  
One thing that complicates Metcalf's character is that we learn at the end of the play that he isn't Major Metcalf at all, but an undercover police officer sent to try and head off the murderer at Monkswell.
- Miss Casewell: A somewhat continental woman in her late-20s or early 30s, who dresses androgynously and often moves and stands like a man. She is taciturn, saying as little as possible about herself, though we learn she has reasonably good professional connections and enough money to live comfortably abroad in Majorca. Her personality is cynical and distant, showing reluctance to engage more than necessary with the other guests, the Ralstons, or Trotter. Often standing alone or in her room, she is a solitary figure. However, during the second act she becomes more emotionally vulnerable, which she blames on the stress of the murder. However, at the end of the play, we learn that she was the sister of the three children sent to Longridge Farm and that she has recognized Trotter as her brother, and therefore as the murderer.
- Mr. Paravicini: A foreigner of indeterminate origin (though possibly Swiss based on the various languages he switches into) and indeterminate age. He arrives at Monkswell

without a reservation, when his car crashes into a snow drift. A somewhat eerie presence, Paravicini seems to enjoy unsettling people. He regularly makes jokes about potentially being a criminal, and especially enjoys toying with Mollie. His clothing is dapper, and he may have a small, neat mustache (based on the stage directions' comparison with Hercule Poirot). A rather sleazy figure, Paravicini regularly suggests that he has adulterous or otherwise sordid sexual affairs. At the end of the play, Metcalf suggests that he is probably a dealer in stolen/smuggled/illegal Swiss watches.

- Detective Sergeant Trotter: A police officer somewhere in his twenties. He speaks with a kind of cockney accent—suggesting a kind of working class, not-especially educated background. However, he is sharp and observant; smarter than he wants to appear. Trotter is confident in his ability to detect the murderer, but regularly frustrated in the residents' unwillingness to be honest with him about their links to the Longridge Farm case. He does have a logical mind, following Mollie's reasoning in throwing suspicion on people other than Christopher, and adding to this with explanations of why everyone should be under suspicion.

Trotter's character is complicated at the end of the play when it is revealed that he is actually the murderer, the older brother of the Longridge Farm children, and that he is the schizophrenic army deserter he had earlier described as the killer. He has sought to take revenge on those he blames for his younger brother's death and for his and his sister's suffering. However, when Casewell reveals herself as his sister, Trotter becomes quiet and complacent, accepting that she is going to take him to a mental asylum.

#### Author Biography

Dame Agatha Christie (1890-1976) is probably the most read mystery author in the English language. Known as the "Queen of Crime," her works have given us iconic detectives like Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, each of whom appear across numerous novels and short stories.

Christie was born in Devon, with a relatively wealthy family. Her early authorial efforts weren't entirely successful, but with the 1920 publication of *The Mysterious Affair At Styles* (originally written in 1916), Christie was launched into the literary stratosphere. The success of this book pushed Christie to turn primarily to mystery/crime writing, with the key characters (Poirot, Japp, and Arthur Hastings) becoming major recurring figures in her work.

In 1914, Christie married Archibald Christie, with whom she had a daughter named Rosalind Margaret Clarissa. In 1926, Christie fell into a deep depression after the death of her mother. This was compounded later that year when Archibald filed for divorce. Famously, in Dec. 1926, Christie went missing for ten days. No one knows exactly what happened during this time, as Christie herself couldn't seem to remember, or at least never admitted remembering. Her disappearance prompted one of the largest searches in British history, before she was found at a hotel in Yorkshire. Christie would later marry Max Mallowan in 1930, to whom she remained married until her death.

Christie wrote at least twenty seven plays, with at least seventeen being staged. Of these, *The Mousetrap* is by far the most successful (see Production History below for more).

Christie died at home of natural causes at age 85 in 1976.

### Production History

*The Mousetrap* has the longest single production run of any play in history. On 25 Nov. 1952, it began its London run at the Ambassadors Theatre, transferring to St. Martin's Theatre in 1974 as part of the same production run. The show continued uninterrupted until a brief shutdown from 2020-21 because of the COVID pandemic. The production in London has surpassed 26,000 performances making it far and away the longest single run in world history. The performances at the Ambassadors actually broke the West End record for longest run as early as 1958, when it hit its 2,239 show.

However, *The Mousetrap* didn't begin in London. It actually premiered 6 Oct. 1952 in Nottingham and had a brief tour of (mostly) Northern England before settling into the capital. The play was shown in six major English cities during this initial tour.

Many famous British actors have performed in *The Mousetrap*, including Richard Attenborough and Sheila Sim in the original cast on the West End; Patrick Stewart, Julie Waters, Hugh Bonneville, and Iain Glen all starred in the 25,000th performance in 2012.

In addition to the London run, *The Mousetrap* has been performed around the world, in both major theatres and community theatres (like us). The play begins a Broadway run this year featuring—like ours—a cast of Americans.

### Historical Background and Selected References

- *The Mousetrap*: the title of the play is taken from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Hamlet has the players stage a play-within-the-play with the intention of provoking a guilty reaction from Claudius in order to prove that Claudius killed Hamlet's father.
- Page 7:
  - "family with dwindling resources": the 1950s saw the continuation of a long trend of great families who were "land rich, cash poor" losing their status and often having to sell their ancestral homes—this is a plot element of *Downton Abbey*, for instance.
  - [Refectory table](#): a longish table with four legs connected by crossbeams, usually fairly plain in design.
  - [Victorian armchair](#): a chair typically with a rounded wooden frame, padding and a cloth cover, four legs, and two arms consisting of wooden frames.
  - [Canterbury cabinet](#): a low boxy container with slots opening toward the top for storing papers, magazines, etc.
  - Wall brackets: wall mounted lights. The actual design could vary quite a bit, so this reference in itself doesn't tell us much about the look of the lights, but given that this is an older country house they would probably have been converted from gas lamps to electric.
- Page 8:
  - "Three Blind Mice": A famous English nursery rhyme of uncertain origin and original meaning. The story involves a farmer's wife cutting off the mice's tails after they chase her. [Lyrics available here](#).

- [Police whistle](#): British police traditionally used whistles or rattles to get the attention of other police before the widespread use of radios and telephones. These whistles had a pea in the chamber to provide additional volume.
- [Scotland Yard](#): Officially, the headquarters of the London Metropolitan Police, though the term is often used as shorthand for the Met itself, particularly in terms of higher level investigations. The Met is generally regarded as the best police service in Britain, often being brought in to consult on difficult or high profile cases elsewhere in the country.
- Culver St., Paddington: In 1952, Paddington was a London borough, being formally integrated into Greater London in 1965. During the 19th century, Paddington became home to a large immigrant population (particularly Jewish and Greek), and subsequently because strongly associated with slums, urban poverty, and crime—associations that remained through the 1950s, even though the area went through renovations beginning in the 1930s.
- Page 9: [The Aga](#): Large cast-iron stoves designed to provide both multiple cooking surfaces and to heat a house using the same fuel for dual purposes. These were extremely popular in mid-twentieth century Britain.
- Page 10:
  - [Chicken netting](#): Wire mesh designed to contain small farm animals, typically poultry.
  - [Coke](#): A type of fuel, similar to coal, but more refined and (slightly) better in terms of air pollution. This was a common fuel source in mid-century Britain, though especially in the WWII and post-war eras supplies and quality could be uncertain.
  - Daily women: Servants who worked in large houses during the day, but then returned to their own homes at night. This was a big change in the nature of service during early 20th century Britain; before this, many servants lived full time in the house where they worked and were, in principle, on call at all times.
- Page 11:
  - “Bank it up for the night”: With heating sources that required the manual addition of fuel (like coke), a large quantity of fuel would typically be added before going to sleep. This ensured that the house would remain warm all night and that the fire wouldn’t need to be re-lit in the morning.
  - Correspondence course: primarily developing in the mid-19th century, correspondence courses were a form of distance education in which people could learn by mail. Course materials would be sent out and exams or essays would be mailed back to the school. This could include general education, but also lent itself to learning trades like hotel management.
- Page 12:
  - “servants with forged references”: this was a common fear among the upper classes in Britain, as servants had intimate access to their homes and belongings. A thief or a servant dismissed on suspicion of theft could forge good references—which were much harder to check prior to the use of widespread telecommunications—in order to gain access to an employer’s house.

- Seven guineas: An old style of British currency, actually outdated by 1952. This may be slang for a pound (twenty shillings), or it may refer to a guinea's final set value at 21 shillings—equivalent to £1.05. With inflation, this would be in the neighborhood of £175 per week today, or \$225.
- Page 13:
  - Woven artistic tie: A [knit tie](#), which was an emerging fashion in young men's wear during the 1950s. Drawing from jazz fashion and the Ivy Style that emerged in the US, post-war fashions became bolder with more casual fabrics and brighter colors. Though still pretty conservative by today's standards, these changes showed a significant break from the black, grey, and navy palette of previous generations.
  - [Indian Army](#): Prior to independence in 1947, India was the gem in the British imperial crown, and the British Indian Army maintained control of the colony in conjunction with local rulers. Many British soldiers had served in India, where they often developed a complex relationship to Indian culture. On the one hand, Indian food, tea, clothing, and aesthetics had major impacts on British culture, but the British also generally looked down on Indians as culturally inferior. An Indian army aesthetic would likely combine some Indian elements like rugs or textiles with a lot of heavy, solid furniture.
  - Memsahibish: Derived from the Arabic word "Sahib," in colonial India the term sahib meant something like "owner" or "boss," and was applied to those in positions of colonial authority (or sometimes to any British/white person). Memsahib is the female version referring to the wife of a sahib. Stereotypically, memsahibs were matronly, severe, suspicious, no-nonsense, and utilitarian.
  - [Birds of Paradise](#): Antipodean bird famous for its lovely plumage. Because of its beauty, the birds were widely hunted, including both to be kept in cages and to be stuffed for display. Christopher could mean either here, though likely taxidermied.
  - [Sideboard](#): A piece of kitchen furniture featuring a large flat top to display food and/or dishes, as well as several cabinets of different sizes for holding various pieces of China.
- Page 14:
  - Dickens, Scrooge, and Tiny Tim: Central characters from [Charles Dickens'](#) famous novel [A Christmas Carol](#). The novel was incredibly popular and helped establish the Dickensian aesthetic—winter in urban London with suffering but resilient slum dwellers and cheery pickpockets. Ebenezer Scrooge is the protagonist. He is a callous and greedy employer who drives his clerk Bob Cratchit mercilessly, even resenting giving him Christmas Day off work. Scrooge is visited in the night by the ghost of his dead business partner, then taken by three ghosts into Christmas scenes from the past, the present, and the future, during which Scrooge realizes the error of his ways and resolves to be more generous. Tiny Tim is Cratchit's disabled child, who relies on a crutch. Although he suffers greatly, Tiny Tim is the prototype of the optimistic Dickensian, who sees the good in everyone and everything.

- Poor Harriet: A trope of Victorian novels and melodrama was the spinster relative, often an aunt. Because single women in the Victorian era had very few economic opportunities—especially women of the middle and upper-middle classes—women without husbands often became dependents on their relatives. One trope for these women in fiction and on stage was the quiet, submissive spinster who accepted any abuse from the family which supported her economically.
- Dogsboddy: Originally a British navy term, a dogsbody does menial tasks, generally as a low-level servant.
- [Four poster](#): A fancy, antique-style bed with vertical posts at each corner (and often with an elaborately carved headboard and footboard) and generally a canopy over the top. In many cases, four posters traditionally included curtains that could be drawn all around the bed, giving the occupant(s) privacy, though by the 20th century such curtains were often more decorative than functional because the notion of a private room had become more common.
- [Chintz](#) roses: Chintz fabric was a light, brightly patterned cloth, often with floral designs (like roses). By the 1950s, it was relatively old-fashioned, but still strongly associated with rustic country settings like Monkswell Manor.
- Page 15:
  - [Christopher Wren](#) and [St. Paul's](#): Wren was one of England's most famous and influential architects, Wren helped given London much of its distinctive aesthetic following the Great Fire in 1666. Known for his Baroque style, Wren favored busy, heavy designs with a lot of artistic flourishes influenced more by the medieval gothic than by the Renaissance neoclassical. One of Wren's most famous buildings was St. Paul's Cathedral in central London, which was the tallest building in London for centuries and is still a dominant feature of the skyline. The church has hosted numerous royal weddings, memorial ceremonies, state funerals, royal jubilees, and other events of national significance.
  - Prefab nests: During WWII—which ended in 1945, 7 years before this play—much of London was bombed to ruin during the Blitz (1940-41), as were other major cities like Coventry, Kingston on Hull, Plymouth, or Manchester. Because there was so much destruction and Britain was largely bankrupt by the war effort, prefab homes became central to the rebuilding efforts, with cheaper, less durable materials being used to erect new houses quickly.
- Page 16: Hot water boiler: Hot/warm water for things like bathing or washing needed to be specifically heated. As with the Aga and other heaters, this would require fuel (like coke) being added to maintain the temperature and keep the fire lit.
- Page 17: [Dry rot](#): A type of fungus that deteriorates wood. Dry rot is common in older houses, particularly ones which haven't been maintained well and consistently. This causes damage to the wood and can lead to structural instability.
- Page 18:
  - "[worm](#) in this desk": Woodworm is a term for multiple types of beetles that burrow into wood to make their homes and lay their eggs. Like dry rot, this damages the wood and can cause significant problems.



- “indoor staff”: Household servants like butlers, maids, footmen, our lady's maids were common in wealthy British homes before WWI, but by the 1950s fewer people were employed in domestic service. Mrs. Boyle's expectation of indoor staff shows an out-of-date mindset more at home in the 19th than the mid-20th century.
- Page 19: [“The North Wind Doth Blow”](#): A Mother Goose nursery rhyme about the suffering of various creatures, including children in the last stanza, from the cold.
- Page 22: “Little Jack Horner”: A popular English nursery rhyme about a boy who greedily seeks the best treats from a pie, presumably one meant to be shared among the entire family. Often seen as a song about selfishness, many adult moralists see the song as condemning Horner. [The lyrics are available here.](#)
- Page 23: [Minced beef](#) and cereal: While in the US we usually say “ground beef,” in the UK “minced beef” is a common term for a ground or finely chopped beef that can be used for multiple dishes. Combining ground meat with cereal grains is a common way of making the more expensive meat go further. For example, [haggis](#), [black pudding](#), and [white pudding](#) all combine meat with grains.
- Page 25: [Hercule Poirot](#): One of Christie's most famous and influential detective characters. Poirot is a fastidious Belgian, who loves sharp suits and has a neat mustache. With an incredible breadth of knowledge, great powers of observation, and strong reasoning skills, Poirot helped set the pattern for the literary detective alongside figures like Sherlock Holmes.
- Page 26: “No butcher...”: On one level, this suggests a link to another nursery rhyme (“[Rub-a-dub-dub](#)”). Simultaneously, this reflects a reality of British life before the 1980s, when it was very common to have items delivered by tradespeople, particularly in large homes that placed large, regular orders. Being cut off from tradespeople limited the availability of different types of food, particularly perishables like milk.
- Page 27: [Bridge](#) and other amenities: I believe Mrs. Boyle means some variant of the card game bridge, which was a popular pastime because it involved multiple players and could therefore lead to conversation.
- Page 28: Back stairs: Traditionally in wealthier houses there were separate stairs for the owners and their guests on the one hand and for the servants on the other. Servants' stairs were usually smaller, plainer, and inconspicuously located so that servants could come and go without being seen more than necessary. That the younger characters are perfectly happy using the back stairs, while Mrs. Boyle seems totally opposed to the idea shows changing social attitudes in Britain, especially around issues of rank and privilege.
- Page 29:
  - “all the housework should have been done...”: Another indication of Mrs. Boyle's conservative attitude and expectations. Traditionally, live-in staff would complete chores before the home-owners or guests awoke so that home-owners/guests would not actually see domestic labor being done more than absolutely necessary.
  - Proper staff are hard to get: By the 1950s, fewer and fewer people in Britain were willing to go into domestic service. The WWII ethos of freedom and democracy eroded the power of the aristocracy, while increased economic opportunities

offered higher paying, less labor-intensive, and more dignified means of earning a living for many who might otherwise have gone into service.

- [Socialist](#), Red, pale pink: Socialism is a political philosophy advocating public ownership of the means of production—that is, collective or governmental ownership of industries like manufacturing, agriculture, resource extraction, etc. Following WWII, socialist ideas gained a lot of influence as Britain began constructing the welfare state that created prosperity and economic opportunity from the late 1950s-1980s. Socialists and communists (a related politico-economic philosophy) use(d) red as the color of their revolutionary movements, and so the term “red” became shorthand for a socialist or communist. “Pink,” because it’s lighter than red referred to fellow travelers, or people sympathetic to socialism but not socialists themselves.
- Page 31:
  - “Ice on a bedroom jug”: In older British country houses, bathroom facilities were limited and leaving one’s room at night meant getting very cold, so bedrooms included mini-bathroom facilities. This may mean a pitcher of water and washbasin for washing one’s face in the morning, or it may be a euphemism for a [chamber pot](#).
  - [Chilblains](#): A medical condition in which the hands and/or feet experience capillary damage that leads to swelling and discomfort. This is generally caused by cold exposure.
- Page 32: [Berkshire](#): A county to the west of Greater London, with the eastern portion of the county now more urban and the western portion still rural. This is a relatively easy rural area for Londoners to get to, since it is so close to the city. Pronounced “Bark shur.”
- Page 33:
  - Nylons from Gibraltar: During WWII and the subsequent years, British rationing included material for clothing, which was difficult to get. However, wearing stockings was a social necessity for middle class women, and so many turned to getting them from US GIs, who had much greater access to them in the US, or to the black market. Smugglers from ports like Gibraltar were able to move goods into Britain and sell them illegally for large markups.
  - [Wireless license](#): Much British radio and televisual media was (and is) government controlled, and so to access it people need to pay a fee. Today the most common is a television licensing fee, but before 1953 very few British households had a TV, and so radio was the popular mass entertainment. The funds for the fees support the BBC’s programming. Listening to live radio without a license was a crime.
  - [Coal scuttles](#): A smallish bucket, often cone shaped, used for carrying coal to fireplaces throughout the house. The relatively small opening minimized the amount of coal dust that would get out into the house generally, while allowing the user to pour coal directly into a fireplace wherever it was needed.
- Page 34:
  - “To turn away a *bona fide* traveler...”: I haven’t been able to find any law reflecting this. Sorry.

- [Magistrate](#): A judge who typically handles relatively minor matters or preliminary hearings before a trial with a more senior judge.
- Page 36: “pipes of the downstairs cloakroom”: With poor heating systems in older houses, it was common for water in pipes to freeze, and for the expanded ice to crack the piping. In this case, this has happened in the downstairs bathroom.
- Page 37: “coke more than half stones”: While coke itself burns purer than plain coal, unscrupulous dealers would mix rocks in with the shipments in order to supply less fuel while still getting paid the same amount.
- Page 40: London West Two: This refers to the London postcode system, which has divided the city up into regions and subregions. W2 refers to West London (W) and the Paddington head district (2).
- Page 42: “deserted from the army”: During WWII Britain had conscription, calling up a larger portion of the population to do military service. It’s possible that Georgie Corrigan volunteered and then deserted, but he may also have been conscripted into service.
- Page 43: [Schizophrenic](#): Someone suffering from schizophrenia, a form of mental illness in which delusions, hallucinations, and confused thinking make it difficult to distinguish reality from fantasy. In 1952, there were few effective treatments, and those that did exist were extremely painful and risky, without a good guarantee of working.
- Page 44: Stationed in Edinburgh: This, to me, is a strange reference, because the Longridge farm case likely occurred during WWII, so it’s not clear why Metcalf was in Edinburgh rather than closer to the actual fighting. While Edinburgh was attacked from the air, this reference seems significant in a way that simply being stationed in the anti-aircraft garrison wouldn’t explain. However, since this is a police officer impersonating Metcalf, it might make more sense as police were exempted from conscription.
- Page 47:
  - [Spiv](#): A small time criminal, primarily known for selling black market goods during the rationing eras of WWII-1953. Stereotypically they wore double-breasted suits and fedoras, somewhat like 1920s US gangsters.
  - [Rouge](#) and [powder](#): Cosmetics. Face powder provides a base layer, typically for providing a smooth, consistent base to put other makeup on. Rouge is used to redden the cheeks, creating a more flushed and lively appearance.
- Page 50:
  - [Bournemouth](#) Hotel: Bournemouth is a resort town on the southern coast of England. As a resort town, it would typically be welcoming to travelers and people staying only short periods, consistent with Mrs. Boyle’s statement that she now lives out of hotels.
  - [Leamington](#): A spa town in central England. Known for its healing waters, Leamington might suggest Metcalf has a medical condition, possibly a wound from his military service.
  - [Hampstead](#): A wealthy and artistic neighborhood in London.
  - [Kensington](#): An area in central London with many museums, consulates, galleries, etc. Not really a residential area.
  - Ration books: During WWII and into the early 50s, food was rationed in Britain to ensure the military could be fed and subsequently because there wasn’t enough

food available. Ration books were sets of coupons which listed how much of various items one was entitled to per week. While every citizen officially had one, sometimes they were stolen or sold.

- Page 51:
  - London bus ticket: Public transportation is a common and efficient means of travel in the UK, with buses providing easy access to London from the immediate surroundings and trains being used for longer journeys. Even today, Britain has much lower car ownership rates than the US.
  - [Extension](#): A second (or third, etc.) telephone connected to a single residential phone line. This would allow more than one person to participate in a phone conversation, or to overhear one.
- Page 52: [Torch](#): The British term for a flashlight.
- Page 53:
  - “crypt of an old monastery”: Many large houses in Britain were built over the former sites of monasteries, several of which were destroyed when [Henry VIII dissolved them](#) between 1536-1541. Often the abandoned stones and building materials were scavenged to erect new buildings.
  - “Monkswell”: This could refer to the former monastery, as Metcalf suggests, but it might also refer to a [priest hole](#). During the Tudor period (1485-1603) primarily, Catholicism was outlawed, but Catholic families often hid priests so they could privately hear Mass.
- Page 62: “prisoner of the Japs”: During WWII, many of Britain’s colonial possessions in southeast Asia were conquered by the Japanese, and there was significant fighting in Burma (modern Myanmar). Many British soldiers were taken prisoner, and the Japanese were considered especially brutal captors because they often forced prisoners to work in difficult, hot conditions without sufficient supplies.
- Page 64: [Barrister](#): The British term for a lawyer.
- Page 65: “There aren’t any backgrounds nowadays”: This reflects another social change going on during the 1950s, as networks of family connections and relationships broke down and individual choice became more important. Before WWI especially, upper and middle class families often put significant effort into finding the most suitable match and ensuring their children married well. Throughout the post-WWI period, and especially in the 50s, people increasingly married on their own volition.
- Page 66: [Evening News](#): An extremely popular London paper from the 1880s-1980.
- Page 67: [Christopher Robin](#): The human protagonist of [A.A. Milne’s Winnie-the-Pooh](#) series. Robin is a dreamy child who loves make-believe, though in the later stories there is some indication he is beginning to grow up.
- Page 71: Barmy: British slang for crazy or eccentric.
- Page 74:
  - “Jeunesse”: Probably referring to “[Youth](#),” by the French Symbolist poet [Arthur Rimbaud](#). Rimbaud was as famous for his turbulent personal life as he was for his short, but influential, literary career. He was a bohemian who used drugs, drank absinthe, and openly had romantic affairs with men, including married men, which was scandalous during the late 19th century.

- Market [Hampton](#): Hampton is a neighborhood in western London, putting it reasonably close to the rural areas of Berkshire, but still giving it access to the resources of the Metropolitan Police.
- Page 81: *Amour*: French for love, usually meaning a love affair.
- Page 82:
  - [Ritz Hotel](#): One of the fanciest and most famous hotels in the world, the Ritz is a byword for luxury and has a notoriously exclusive clientele.
  - [Stockbroker](#): Someone who makes money buying and selling stocks in companies or futures. London's stock market is one of the most important in the world.
- Page 83:
  - [Majorca](#): A Spanish island in the Mediterranean. Mallorca (or Majorca, as it's spelled here) is a popular destination for British expatriates seeking warmer climates outside Britain itself. Often those who have moved there from the UK have either money, or artistic inclinations, or both.
  - Morgan's Bank, [Leadenhall St.](#): A central financial area in London, home to a number of banks across the years.
  - Ledbury Hotel, [Knightsbridge](#): A wealthy area in central London.
- Page 85: The third degree: A slang term for torture.
- Page 86: "six impossible things before breakfast": A reference to the [Red Queen](#), Alice's antagonist in [Lewis Carroll's \*Through the Looking-Glass\*](#). The Red Queen sets Alice's main task in the novel—to get to the final square in a land laid out as a chess board. She claims to believe many impossible things, which she's grown accustomed to through years of practice.
- Page 87: "Little Bo Policeman": A reference to the nursery rhyme "Little Bo-Peep," which tells the story of a shepherdess who carelessly allows her sheep to escape, possibly losing them to thieves. It's fundamentally a story about carelessness and the penalty for it. [The lyrics are available here](#).
- Page 89: "you're all guilty": A reference to Christie's 1934 novel [Murder on the Orient Express](#), in which Poirot determines that each of the suspects contributed to murdering the victim. This is one of Christie's most famous novels, in part because the resolution was so shocking for readers.
- Page 93: Police revolver: Although some British police carried [revolvers](#) in historically dangerous neighborhoods and during WWII, for the most part British police have historically not carried guns of any kind.
- Page 96: "mad as a hatter": Traditional hatters used mercury to stabilize the felt in hats, which exposed them to mercury fumes leading to [erethism](#), a form of mercury poisoning involving changes in personality up to delusional behavior. While the phrase "mad as a hatter" predates Lewis Carroll's [Alice's Adventures in Wonderland](#), the character of the [Hatter](#) helped bring the concept of the mad hatter into mainstream culture.