

Crypto da Vinci

a Peter White mystery

An Excerpt

SIMON BUCK



An Alnpete Book

Crypto da Vinci

First published in Great Britain by Alnpete Press, 2009
An imprint of Alnpete Limited

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Alnpete Press, PO Box 757
Dartford, Kent
DA2 7TQ

www.alnpetepress.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-9552206-2-3

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Printed by Antony Rowe Limited

Foreword

Much as I abhor pretension in fiction, it became clear as this book took shape that certain devices would be necessary to assist you, gentle reader, without distracting from the narrative. Therefore I have felt it justified to leave footnotes from the translator in Leonardo's text – I would not presume to edit Leonardo's own words! Furthermore, to obviate the need for such annotations in Peter White's text without resorting to affected didactic speeches between characters, I have added (very brief) notes on some of the historical players overleaf – for those readers with little schooling in European history (such as our friends over the water); read them as if they were notes from a talk given by Peter's friend Al on a cold winter's evening in your local village hall. Al has also supplied a very limited bibliography for anyone interested in pursuing some of the themes touched upon. Finally, I have not resisted the temptation to continue, in the same vein as in the previous novel, to use the literary deceit of presenting fiction as if it were a transcript of real events communicated by the chief protagonist (but then claiming it as fiction in order to protect the identities of the other parties involved). *Caveat lector* †.

Simon Buck, Kent
Spring 2009

† Which is, of course, another pretension adopted by certain authors – using foreign quotes or phrases in the original language without a translation (not even in a footnote) for those of us without such an all-encompassing education. *Caveat lector*, as you will be aware, means... oh look it up yourself.

The events documented within this story occurred during the summer of 2003. In general, I have used participants' real names, except where they have requested otherwise. One or two locations have been altered slightly to protect identities, and some timescales have been shortened to improve the narrative – I justify this as dramatic licence (which I got from a Post Office for ten bob in 1968!)

You may feel that Al seems to spend a lot of time lecturing me, as I had a limited historical education. You probably think that this is merely a device to ensure that the reader knows what's going on, but, in fact, she actually spent even more time explaining things to me than is recorded here!

If you've been affected by any of the issues in this book, then Al has suggested some relevant titles for further information (which you may even be able to get from Mint Books).

Peter White
Spring 2009

For Iris

'Tis enough for me, if the Government will let me pass unquestion'd.

John Dryden, 1697

Prologue

I don't usually bother with birthdays. I go out of my way to try and make sure people aren't aware of mine. But family and close friends know. Despite my wishes they still insist on cards and presents and cake. Okay, I like cake. These days there are too many candles to fit on top so at least I'm spared that embarrassment. But I don't like getting presents. People usually buy me things they assume I'd like rather than things I actually want. It's rare that I get something worthwhile. But I feel I have to be grateful and cheerful and feign excitement over the jumper or the book by some unknown author – "...I knew you'd love it, it's like the one I got you last year...". Don't get me wrong, I love giving presents, although I always find out in advance what the recipient really wants.

My last birthday, though, was different. That's when I got a present that turned out to be a lot more exciting than anyone could have imagined. It was a book. Now, I enjoy books, they're my only real vice (if you exclude food, but I see that as a necessity rather than a vice). The thing is, I prefer to choose books myself – I'm very picky about the authors and genres that I read and I tend to be very critical of literary style. So I'm usually wary of books that I'm given. This was an old book, a good book admittedly and what's more it was a book I already had. But there was something special about this particular book that I felt almost immediately, although it took me a while to realise exactly what it was. Just a book. Then again, not just a book but, quite literally, the key to uncovering a mystery that had remained hidden since the 1500s and which involved some of the most charismatic

and intriguing characters from the Renaissance; a secret, intended to have been revealed as a result of political intrigue in the 18th century, that could have fundamentally changed the course of English and European history; a disclosure that, even today, could have serious repercussions for many powerful people, so much so that by deciphering it my best friend was in danger. The story starts with my birthday – although I guess it really started 500 years earlier in France, but let's not get ahead of ourselves...

Gift

“Happy Birthday!” said Hugh, “I found this in a little second-hand bookshop down in East Malling. I knew you’d love it because you’ve read Virgil before haven’t you? I’m sure you told me that. Damn I’ve told you what it is now!”

Hugh handed me a small beautifully wrapped package. Silver paper with holographic stars twinkled up at me, trapped in place by a white ribbon with miles of tight curlicues.

“I’d have found out in a few seconds, anyway.”

I grinned, carefully unpicking the ribbon and sliding it off the package, liberating the holograms. The silver paper sprang open as if alive and revealed the contents of the bundle. A set of three volumes. I could already see from the spines that it was John Dryden’s translation of the works of Publius Virgilius Maro.

“Dryden. How appropriate.”

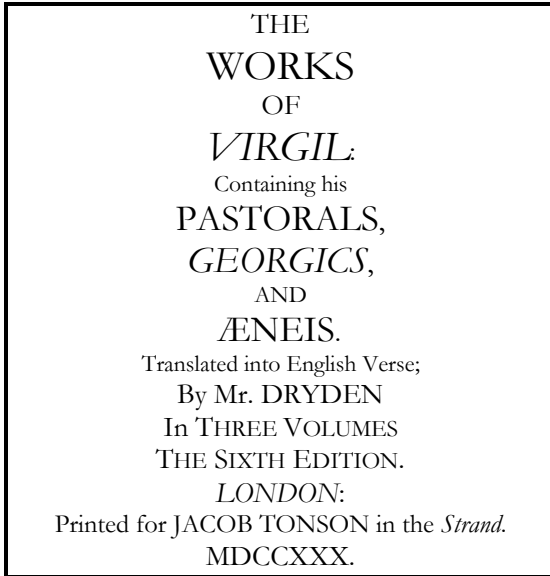
“Why?”

“It’s his birthday today too.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that. It wasn’t a deliberate choice on my part. I don’t really know anything about John Dryden.”

“Just an added bonus then.” I grinned.

I carefully opened volume 1 and looked at the title page:



“1730. The sixth edition. Thanks Hugh.” I said.

“You don’t already have it do you? Should I take it back and get you something else?” Hugh was starting to look worried, so I thought I’d better not upset him.

“No I don’t have this already. It’s wonderful, thank you.” It wasn’t really a lie, I don’t already have a copy of the sixth edition, my copy is the rarer fifth edition. Still there was something about these volumes that was attractive.

“The old chap in the shop said that he thought they’d been rebound at some time, because he was sure that they weren’t the original end papers. Too clean, he said. But it looks like an old binding to me.”

Hugh looked at the books with a frown.

“What do you think?”

“He’s right. The binding doesn’t seem to be the

original, but it's still almost as old as the pages inside. I wonder why it was rebound when it was still almost new? Maybe the covers got spoilt." I turned the volumes over in my hands and examined the edges of the pages. "Although there's no sign of any damage to the paper. Oh well I guess we'll never know. Thanks again, they're really nice."

"You're welcome." Hugh smiled.

I flicked through the first pages of volume 1 until I came to the dedication to Lord Clifford.

"Did you know John Dryden was the first Poet Laureate?" I asked Hugh.

"No."

"Apparently he impressed the King who decided he wanted to keep him around versifying. Then the King died and there was another one, or two. I can't remember the details. Dryden had decided to become a Catholic and the latest king was very anti-Catholic, as a result Dryden refused to swear allegiance and was promptly sacked. I think he's the only Poet Laureate ever to be fired. So then he started to translate the Classics, but needed to find patrons to pay for them. When he found one he was almost pathetically grateful. For example, there are twenty pages of grovelling thanks to Lord Clifford at the beginning of Volume 1."

I handed the book to Hugh and continued.

"He says that it was easier to do the translation than to find a patron who would support him. Clifford paid for the Pastorals. Then there is a dedication to the Earl of Chesterfield for the Georgics. He says that he was very nervous and put off approaching the Earl to ask for his patronage for seven years."

I picked up volume 2.

"Finally here at the beginning of volume 2 there's another one, where is it?" I searched for the dedication.

“Ah, here it is. A dedication to the Earl of Mulgrave that goes on for ...” I flicked through the book “...over a hundred pages, in much smaller type. But really it’s an essay on Virgil and the nature of poetry. Followed, of course, by the Aeneid itself. Then at the end there’s a postscript where he mentions a few others who’ve said nice things about his book despite the nasty comments some people have been making about him. Hang on...” I put the book back on the table and picked up the third volume, turning to the Postscript to the Reader on page 1001.

“Here we go. *What Virgil wrote in the Vigour of his Age, in Plenty and at Ease, I have undertaken to Translate in my Declining Years: struggling with Wants, oppressed with Sickness, curbed in my Genius, liable to be misconstrued in all I write; and my Judges, if they are not very equitable, already prejudiced against me, by the Lying Character which has been given them of my Morals.*”

I closed the book and grinned at Hugh.

“Poor old Dryden, desperate to find some patronage among what was left of the educated nobility so he could spend his time doing what he wanted, while being vilified for his choice of religion.”

“I’m jealous. I’d like to find a patron who would pay me to do what I want all the time,” said Hugh.

“I thought you enjoyed your job? You always seem to be happy.”

“I do, yeah. But. Well. You know what I mean. Anyway, how come you know so much about this book?”

“It’s a collection of all Dryden’s translations of Virgil rolled into one edition. It’s very well known.” I hoped I sounded convincing enough. I didn’t want Hugh to think I was ungrateful.

“I’ve never read anything by Dryden,” said Hugh, “or Virgil for that matter. I had a flick through before I wrapped them up. It needs translating from the

translation if you ask me. Couldn't really understand it. F instead of S and strange spellings. Music spelt with a K on the end. Might just as well be in the original Greek."

"Latin." I said, involuntarily.

"What?" asked Hugh.

"Virgil was Roman not Greek."

"I thought the Aeneid is about the Trojan War."

"Not really, it's about the aftermath. Aeneas, the hero, escapes from Troy when the Greeks win the war and sails around a bit having adventures."

"Like Odysseus?"

"Sort of."

"But who was Aeneas? Why write the story about him?" asked Hugh.

"He was a nephew of the King of Troy, although his mother was the Goddess Aphrodite. He has a walk-on part in Homer's Iliad, when he fights Achilles and others, but survives. Then he is prophesied as the eventual ruler of the Trojans by the God Poseidon."

"Weren't the Trojans all killed when the Greeks sacked Troy? Wooden horse and all that?"

"Not quite, Aeneas and some others escaped out of the city by the back door." I laughed.

"Really?"

"Oh yes! Aeneas has adventures, Cyclops, harpies and so on. Hangs around in Sicily for a while where some of his followers settle. Then he goes on to Carthage and Queen Dido falls in love with him. But he leaves because he's told in a dream that his destiny is in Italy. He lands in what is now Tuscany, allies with the Etruscans and has a series of battles against the Latins, which he eventually wins. His son founds a city there and it's his descendants who eventually found Rome. So the Romans look back to him as their most illustrious ancestor."

"But I thought Rome was founded by Romulus and

Remus ... and a wolf. Or something?" Hugh was looking puzzled now.

"Right. But they were descendants of Aeneas – the brothers, not the wolves – so he provides a heritage that goes back long before the founding of Rome. To the time of the Etruscans, demonstrating domination over the Latins, and even further back to those Trojans who survived the sack of Troy, demonstrating superiority over the Greeks. Which is why Virgil wrote the story as an epic poem like Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. For both cultural and political kudos."

"Why political?" Hugh was looking puzzled again. We'd been at school together where we had been taught no ancient history, I'd picked it up from reading the classics but Hugh had had other interests.

"The first emperor, Augustus, had just won a decisive battle. He was now sole ruler and Rome was the master of the western civilised world. So Virgil used the story of Aeneas to establish a divine origin for the State and the inevitability of its great destiny. He was a very good poet so he pulled it off too, not turning out patriotic drivel but such an epic that in his own lifetime it was the cause of great national pride and a sense of true destiny, even for ordinary Romans."

"No-one would ever guess that you're half Roman would they!" Hugh laughed. "The way you talk about Rome and the Romans it's obvious that you identify with them."

"We're all slaves to our own destiny." I said, grinning.

Putting the books down on the table I led Hugh into the kitchen to get a drink. I didn't think about Dryden, Virgil or Aeneas again until later that evening when I was clearing up.

~

As I scrunched up the silver paper, consigning the stars to the eternal darkness of landfill, I looked again at the covers of the Virgil. There was something about them that was nagging at me but I still didn't know what it was. I picked them up to take to the spare room that was lined with bookcases and that I grandiloquently called my Library. Making some room on the shelf next to the other edition of Dryden's masterpiece I carefully slotted the three new volumes in place. As I stood looking at them, alongside the previous edition, it was clear what had been nagging at me. The spine was decorated not with fleur-de-lis, as would have been common when it was printed, but with a key. The sort used in icons of St. Peter, the key to the gates of heaven. A very odd sort of motif to use on a book spine in post-Reformation England. Presumably it had been put there when the book was rebound, replacing the original decoration. But I was tired and decided to leave any further speculation for another day.

~

Over the next few days I thought very little about Hugh's gift. I had various pressing engagements and diverting activities to fill my time. The next weekend, however, I was at a loose end and wandered into my Library in search of a little entertainment. While trying to choose between the surreal humour of Robert Rankin and the quiet wit of Lindsay Davies' *Falco*, I remembered the Virgil. Rather than humour, I decided that the day's entertainment should be to investigate those books and deduce why the binding had been replaced with the new strangely decorated covers.

I retrieved all three volumes from the shelf and dropped into my soft reading chair. I love this chair. As you sink

into it you are enveloped by warmth and cosiness. It's so cosy that you can easily imagine you're relaxing on a warm evening under the Mediterranean sun. But it's fatal to close your eyes or a whole day goes by before you know it. My eyelids fluttered, flirting with a snooze. I nearly succumbed, but managed to recover. Snuggling down further into the chair, I kicked my slippers off and scandalously rested my feet on the coffee table. What would my mother have said if she could see me? I grew up in a house where manners were important and sensible etiquette observed – no feet on the coffee table, no elbows on the dining table. As a result I was programmed to be just as fastidious about the same things as my parents had been. Except that we never had a library – plenty of books dotted around the house, but no specific place to read them. So, in my Library, I make the rules; and the first rule is to be as comfortable as possible while reading – if that means feet on the coffee table then so be it!

I re-read Dryden's grovelling to Clifford, cringing and smirking as I did so. Then I turned back to the cover and the end papers. Hugh had been correct, they were very clean; too clean. There was nothing written on them at all. No indication of previous owners. Over the years it would have been common practice for a well-to-do owner to paste an *ex libris* plate inside the cover of every book they owned proclaiming their ownership and, they hoped, their erudition, to the world. Lesser mortals would have made do with carefully writing their own name inside the cover, in their best handwriting. But these volumes had no such disfigurements. No-one had laid claim to them. Nor were there even the faintly pencilled marks of a second-hand bookseller pricing up his stock. Nothing. No stains. No marks. Just clean paper. But it was yellowing. It was yellowing the same amount as the pages

inside. So I guessed that it was roughly the same age. My previous feeling that it was rebound while still new seemed to be justified. I held the book up to the sunlight streaming through the window making dust motes dance about in the quiet and otherwise still room. The end papers were obviously made in the same way as the rest of the book, although slightly heavier. The watermark was identical, in the same orientation as the pages. Then, quite by chance, I noticed that there was a different watermark, but not on the end papers. On the page with the illustration of Mr John Dryden that faced the title page. The watermark was oriented horizontally across the page whereas the other pages had a watermark oriented vertically. Curious. I flicked through to the next illustration and it too had a watermark in an orientation orthogonal to that on the other pages. I knew the printers would have taken more care to be sure that all the pages had similar paper with the same properties, including being laid in the same direction, so that the pages would lie flat together.

Reluctant to move, I nevertheless dragged myself out of the chair and extracted the first volume of my copy of the previous edition of the Dryden. Resettling myself comfortably I examined the watermarks on the pages of that volume. As I expected, the pages, illustrations included, were all made from identical paper with congruent watermarks. I returned to the sixth edition. Each of the illustrations was on a page of paper with disoriented watermarks. I worked my way through all three volumes checking every illustration, thirty-three in the first volume, thirty-eight in the second and thirty-one in the third. It was almost as if the illustrations had all been replaced with newly printed versions. But why would anyone replace the illustrations and rebind the books, unless they had wanted to change the images? I

checked a couple of them against their equivalent in the fifth edition. They looked the same. It didn't make sense. I put the books down, shut my eyes and fell fast asleep in my soft, comfortable reading chair. By the time I awoke it was dark outside. I was conscious just long enough to get out of the chair, undress and tumble into bed. That night I dreamt of books being ripped apart and having their pages turned this way and that. Pictures were removed and replaced. Keys were inscribed on spines and the faces of both Dryden and Virgil swam before my eyes. I don't usually remember my dreams once I wake up, but that night's dream was still in my mind when the dawn chorus determinedly suggested I get up.

~

I'm not a morning person. I know people who wake up and bounce out of bed full of energy and ready to take on whatever the day brings. That's not me. When I wake up – or more usually when I'm woken up – I try to pretend I'm still asleep. If I have to get up at a particular time I set my alarm clock to allow for at least two thumps on the snooze button. Those extra eighteen minutes make all the difference. Finally I summon up the courage to emerge from under the duvet, sit up (usually blinking into slowly expanding awareness), find my slippers with my feet and stagger upright. If I'm lucky I avoid hitting my head on the low beam that's just above the edge of my bed (one of the few disadvantages of living in an old house). By the time I've made it downstairs, via the bathroom, to the kitchen, I'm *compos mentis* enough to make the coffee. I've always liked espresso and used to kick-start my day with a *doppio* made from freshly ground Arabica beans. That zing you get behind the eyes when you skol an espresso would be enough to awaken a zombie. But just at the

moment my system seems to be rebelling against such strong coffee. Medical opinion is that I should stick to decaf. I ask you! How can you get a cup of decaf to wake you up in the morning? But the consequences of having an espresso first thing currently make the rest of the day a misery (don't ask, it's not pleasant). So decaf it is. I think it's the mental torture of having to drink decaf instead of espresso that actually wakes me up rather than the coffee itself. The sugar hit from the compulsory caramel biscuit helps too!

So, as usual, I dragged myself out of bed and down to the beckoning jar of instant decaf. I know you can get decaf espresso but that's just sacrilege. At least instant coffee isn't pretending to be the same thing as espresso.

I sat down at the table, drank my coffee, and chomped on the biscuit. The sunlight was pouring in through the window, unimpeded by the blind that I had forgotten to lower yesterday evening in my short stumble from Library to bed. As full consciousness wormed its way into my mind I started to think about my dream and the disoriented watermarks from last night. Why would the illustrations have been replaced by apparently identical pages? There must be some difference between them, even though they looked the same to a cursory examination. The only solution would be to take a more detailed look for which I would need to use some modern technology. I drained the last third of the mug in one huge gulp, licked the biscuit crumbs from my fingers and stood up refreshed and with a sense of purpose. Now, where had I put my trousers?



Alnpete is an exciting, innovative independent publisher.
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S i m o n B u c k

One Queen, two Kings, a Cardinal, a genius and a misnamed Righteous Elector. Just another day in the life of Peter White! Three people, from different times, with different motivation, but in a similar dilemma, united by a secret code.

Passion: Queen Anne, married after a fairytale romance, caught between a loveless marriage to her husband King James and the guilty secret of her brief affair with handsome seducer, Frederick the Righteous - unknowingly the father of her daughter Elizabeth. Years of repression come to a puissant climax when James announces his intention to marry Elizabeth to Frederick's son. Aghast, Anne has nowhere to turn but the religious leaders she was brought up to despise and who are hated by the rest of the English court.

Obsession: Leonardo is also caught between Church and State. The Cardinal of Aragon persuades the world-renowned genius to apply his talents in the 'service of God' to fulfil a dream of freeing the populace to spend their time in divine worship. The King of France, in awe of Leonardo's brilliance, but no intellectual lightweight himself, is dubious of the Cardinal's motivation and cautions Leonardo. Leonardo may have nowhere to turn but away from the religion with which he has only recently been reconciled.

Truth: Peter White's life suddenly becomes complicated when he discovers the key to a cipher system, invented by Leonardo, hidden in the illustrations of a 17th century book. Soon Peter and his closest friend Al discover that this cipher has been used to hide both Anne's confession and the journal of Leonardo's anguished journey through the Cardinal's project. But uncovering truth can be very dangerous, especially when it threatens the very legitimacy of the British monarchy.

ISBN 978-0-9552206-2-3 pb £9.99

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to read the blog, or to place a order

Simon Buck has been a consultant for many years to blue chip companies including banks, retailers and telecom service providers. He has been widely published in the fields of internet security, electronic commerce, data communications and identity management. His first published novel, *Library of the Soul*, introduced the Peter White mysteries. He was born and brought up in Kent by an Italian mother and English father. He still lives in a village in the Garden of England and has a wife, two adult children and an Apple Macintosh habit to support.