

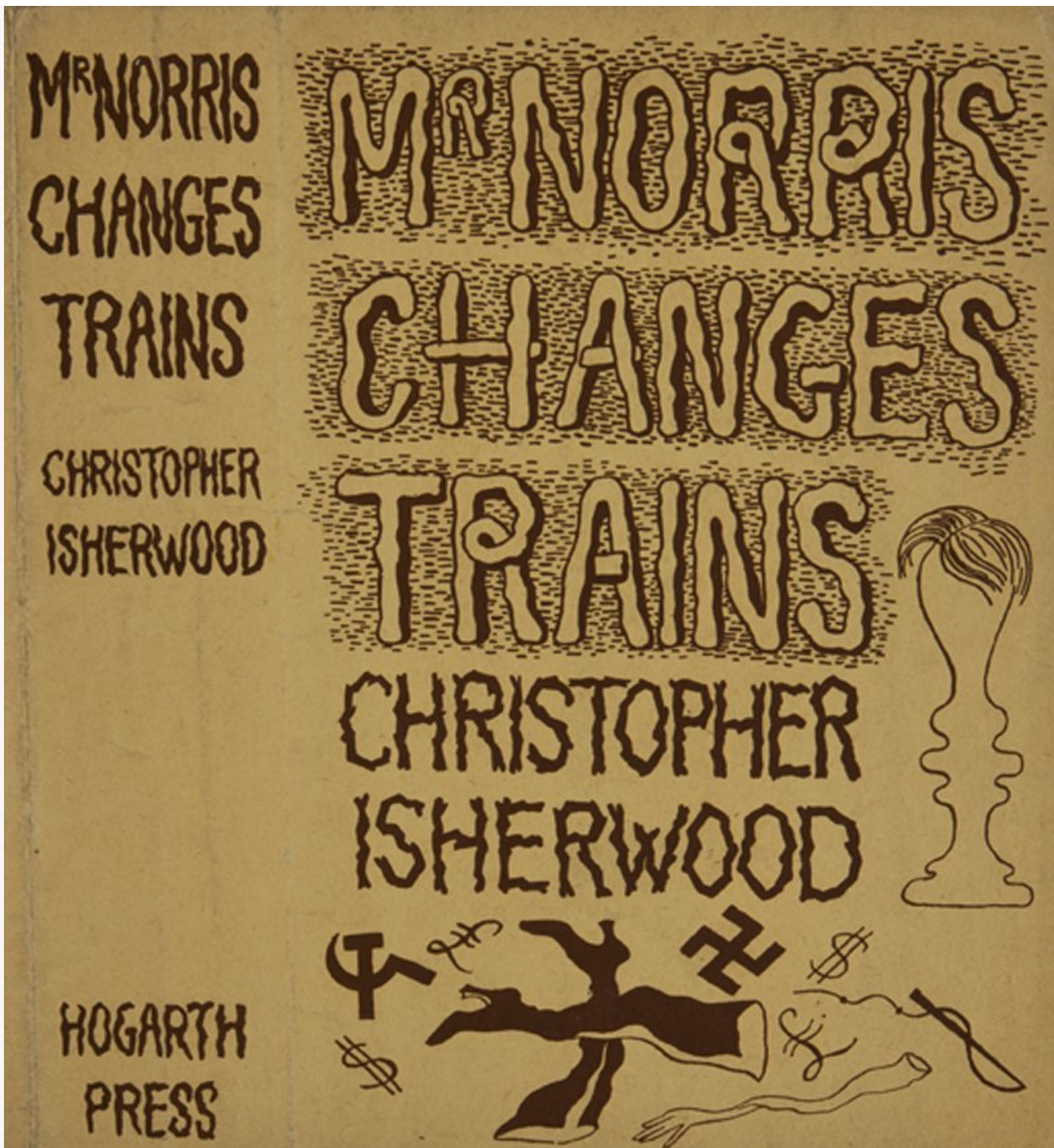
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The invisible man

Behind the curtain

EDWARD PLATT

Royalist, revolutionary, pacifist, arms dealer, Communist, right-wing extremist, con man and traitor. Who was Gerald Hamilton (c.1888–1970)? He claimed among his friends Christopher Isherwood, Jean Cocteau, Guy Burgess, Richard Strauss and Aleister Crowley. As one writer discovers while researching Hamilton in the Tate archive, the truth about the man is elusive.



Dust jacket designed by John Banting for Christopher Isherwood's novel *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (1935)
Courtesy Tate Archive
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I didn't expect to find many references to Gerald Hamilton in the Tate archive. He is the invisible man of the twentieth century. His three autobiographies imply that he was one of its most significant figures, and yet he rarely appears in the authorised accounts of the events in which he claimed to be involved, or the biographies of the people he said he knew. The discrepancy can't be explained by his Walter Mitty-ish tendencies: no doubt he exaggerated, yet his *Zelig*-like knack of appearing in the background while history was being made was real. At various times, he was a royalist and a revolutionary, a pacifist and an arms dealer, a Communist and a right-wing extremist. He was also a con man and a traitor, and the only Englishman – or Irishman; both his name and nationality are disputed – to be arrested for treason in both World Wars.

These days he is best remembered as the model for Arthur Norris, the antihero of *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, the first of Christopher Isherwood's two novels about Berlin in the last days of the Weimar Republic. The clearest reference to his existence in the archive is the cover of the Hogarth Press edition of 1935.

Isherwood's hero 'once modestly described himself as a gentleman', begins the blurb, hinting at the real person that lay behind the fictional creation:

There were others who did not agree with him. This candid but affectionate portrait, by one who came to know him only too well, is concerned with a single episode in his sensational career. Its background is the Berlin of 1930–33, a city of prostitutes and political gunmen, on the edge of starvation and civil war...

[John Banting's](#) drawings convey some of Norris's eccentricities: the presence of both hammer and sickle and swastika anticipate his attempts to profit from the ideological struggle in Germany, and black leather boots and a whip attest to his sexual proclivities (Hamilton was homosexual, but Isherwood made Norris a masochistic heterosexual). Yet the dollar and pound signs signal his most enduring allegiance.

The novel's plot was inspired by Hamilton's involvement with the German Communist Party, but by the beginning of the Second World War he had become convinced that Britain was fighting the wrong enemy. He wanted to make peace with the Nazis, and intended to travel to Ireland to begin negotiations from a neutral embassy. Since he had been arrested in the First World War, he was refused an exit visa, and planned to escape disguised as a nun. He was arrested before he got his 'coif in place' and interned in Brixton Prison.

Hamilton believed that Winston Churchill had ordered his arrest, and in 1955 he got revenge. The Croatian-born sculptor [Oscar Nemon](#) had been commissioned to make a model of Churchill for the Guildhall, in the City of London, but as his subject had recently been re-elected Prime Minister, he couldn't sit for long, and Hamilton – who was Churchill's size and build – took his place. Hamilton posed for Nemon more than 60 times, and both he and Churchill attended the unveiling ceremony. 'WINSTON INTERNED HIM, BUT NOW 18B MAN POSES FOR CHURCHILL STATUE' ran the headline in the *Daily Express* the next day (Regulation 18B of the Defence (General) Regulations 1939 allowed for the internment of those suspected of being Nazi sympathisers). Churchill was furious, and the sculptor apologetic: 'This work of the body, this is something apart,' he said. 'The real work, what I have to convey, that is in the head. And that is Sir Winston's.'

The typed manuscript of Nemon's unpublished memoir is also in the Tate archive. It records the sculptor's often difficult relationship with Churchill, whom he described as 'an unwilling and most impatient sitter', but it does not mention the way he was tricked into placing a sculpture of a traitor in the pantheon of national heroes in the Guildhall. Nemon was one of many people who had reason to forget their association with Gerald Hamilton.

– Find out more about the [Tate archive](#).

– Edward Platt is the author of *Leadville: A Biography of the A40* (Picador). *City of Abraham*, his book about Hebron, will be published in autumn 2012. He is writing a biography of Gerald Hamilton.

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