



S. Y. RAY

Gunpowder, Treason and Plot

Please to remember the fifth of November,
Gunpowder, treason and plot;
I see no good reason why gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot.

AND, of course, we can hardly be said to forget—if remembering is simply confined to the date on the calendar. Each succeeding Fifth of November brings its own plotting and planning for the expenditure of gunpowder in large quantities, but without any more desperate issue at stake than whether to commit expenditure to high-flying rockets or grounded catherine-wheels; whether to concentrate on a backyard show or join the crowds at the public bonfires.

We give up our "pennies for the guy" (though inflation has made itself felt there, too), but few of us give a thought to the Guy who started it all. Yet his was a desperate enough endeavour and a good deal more exciting in the telling than most of the contrived dramas the stage or screen offers us today.

Listeners who tune to the YC stations at 7.30 p.m. on Sunday, November 3, will have the chance to discover this when the NZBS presents *An Occasion for Fireworks*, a radio drama by a New Zealand writer, S. Y. Ray.

She, we learned, had been sharing the thoughts of parents who cannot help but be involved with the event. "My four children," she told us, "are by the way of being pyrotechnomaniacs—is there such a word? At any rate, they like fireworks to such an extent that, come early November each year, I have some hard thoughts about the character whose misdeeds make the excuse for these costly celebrations. Hard thoughts led to curiosity and at that point the staff of our local reference room and the Library Inter-loan Service came to my help and provided me with books which revealed a story irresistibly dramatic.

"The recorded details of the Gunpowder Plot are obscure in places, sometimes contradictory, and have been interpreted in many different ways. In my play I have stuck fairly closely to the conventionally accepted version, though this has been

challenged by modern historians. I have had to add a few falsifications of my own, too, by eliminating some of the minor characters of the actual Plot and attributing their words and actions to the remaining few."

The result of the author's research and writing is a historical play that brings the troubled times of James I vividly to life, and handles the character of Guy Fawkes with sympathy and understanding. In Elizabethan and Jacobean England the Roman Catholics were persecuted, imprisoned and fined, hated by Protestants as much for their "un-English" activities and allegiance to Rome as for their actual mode of worship. Guy Fawkes, a Roman Catholic convert, had left England to fight in Flanders, and when the war ended he chose exile rather than persecution at home. A steady, reliable and brave soldier, he was a good choice for Robert Catesby's plot against the King and Parliament. Thomas Winter, Catesby's cousin, persuaded him to return to England, and Guy, as the only conspirator whom the authorities had not known as a Catholic, was chosen to rent the house from which they hoped to tunnel under Parliament, and to act as cover for the other conspirators. When the tunnel idea failed, it was Guy Fawkes who rented the cellars of Parliament itself for storage space, and who kept watch the final night.

The nerves of the conspirators were constantly at breaking point, with the fear of damnation for the sin of murder, as well as fear of the appalling punishment decreed for treason, adding to the atmosphere of tension.

The part of Guy Fawkes in the NZBS production is taken by the Australian actor Kevin Brennan, who has been heard in New Zealand as Henri in *Knave of Hearts*, and the original Jonathan Smith in *Doctor Paul*. Other visiting players who take part (members of the *All for Mary Company*) are Anthony Ward, playing Thomas Percy, and Jerome White, taking Jack Wright. Thomas Winter is played by Alan Jervis, and Robert Catesby by Roy Leywood. The play was produced by William Austin.

It is S. Y. Ray's first play, but she has written several short stories, including "Bored and Lodging," "The Fall," and "Joshua's Brethren," published in *The Listener*. She has lived in Wanganui and Wellington, and her home is now in Palmerston North, where she claims to lead a very ordinary life.

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