1943
Fleming and Jamaica – First Contact

July 1943: a high-level Anglo-American naval conference in Kingston, Jamaica. German U-boats are causing havoc in the Caribbean, sinking vital shipping.

Assistant to the Director of Naval Intelligence Ian Fleming is sent to the island to help deal with the pressing problem. There are wild rumours that Axel Wenner-Gren, the millionaire Swede supposedly linked to Hermann Goering, has built a secret submarine base on Hog Island, his private paradise isle near Nassau. Urgent action is needed to prevent threats to the vital shipping route from the Gulf of Mexico to Europe and Africa.

Fleming brings along his boyhood friend Ivar Bryce, who also works in intelligence. Bryce is keen to show Fleming Jamaica, where his current wife has recently purchased a famous plantation 'Great House', Bellevue, perched 1,500 feet above Kingston. This is where the two men will stay.

Fleming and Bryce meet in New York and take the Silver Meteor to Miami – the very same journey that will one day be replicated by Bond and Solitaire in *Live and Let Die*. From there they fly to Kingston,

to find Jamaica 'pelting with rain as well as quivering with the heat of a Turkish bath'. The five-day conference takes place at Kingston's waterside Myrtle Bank, one of the island's largest and best hotels. But thanks to Bryce, Fleming retreats each night from the sticky heat of the city up to the serenity of Bellevue.

It is at Bellevue that the story of Fleming in Jamaica begins. It is here that Fleming falls in love with the island that will give birth to his iconic creation: British intelligence officer James Bond.

Borrowing a car, Fleming and Bryce headed through the growing darkness and relentless downpour to Half Way Tree (then a village outside Kingston), before leaving the main road to climb a zigzagging track, the surface of which 'resembled a river bed'. After 'endless hairpin bends', requiring very careful driving, they reached Bellevue at last. It was dark, locked and had clearly seen better days. Shouting and knocking eventually produced Elizabeth, the old Jamaican caretaker, who let them in and rustled up a 'stringy, tasteless' chicken and some 'unaccustomed' yams for them to eat. There was no alcohol; only a bottle of grenadine, so that was what they drank that first night. Holding the pink glass, Fleming took a chair out on to the veranda, edging it as near the falling curtain of rain as possible. There he sat staring out into the streaming darkness, lost in thought.

For two hundred years, the Great House had served for visiting dignitaries and high-ranking colonial officials as a getaway from the heat and humidity of the city below. Nelson himself – a hero of Fleming – had lodged there. Bellevue had been through a large number of owners since Nelson's visits, and had operated as a small plantation, growing in different periods coffee, pimento, ginger, avocados and bananas. In Fleming's time it looked out over a huge green expanse of sugar cane at the feet of the red hills to the west. Around the house lay a rich tropical garden, including a nutmeg

J. B. Kidd's lithograph of Bellevue from 1835. Kidd specialised in idealised views of plantation life.

walk. Behind the estate to the east the mountains rose to their Blue Peak, 7,000 feet above sea level, and in front stretched an arresting view all the way across Kingston, the bay and the azure sea beyond.

Blanche Blackwell (née Lindo), who would become Fleming's lover and closest companion in Jamaica, visited Bellevue as a teenager in the late 1920s. For her, it was a special place, but menacing. She remembers 'lovely grounds around it', but also that the house had a 'very bad history'. The story went that a young woman had thrown herself off the cliff at the front of the property. 'It was definitely haunted,' says Blanche. She and her brothers had gone there with a Ouija board to make contact with the ghost.

Today, little of the original house remains, beside those bits made of stone – the kitchen, water butt, foundations and an outhouse. A house-sitter squats in a couple of the remaining rooms, and keeps the bush down immediately beside the heavily barred building. A dog

patrols the overgrown grounds, where fruits of all descriptions drip off the trees – ackee, jackfruit, cocoa, custard apple, naseberry. Few are collected and the fallen fruits are a riot of wasps, flies and crawling insects. The baking hot air carries a sweet, rotting smell. To the back of the property there is an ugly straggle of houses, some unfinished, as well as uncleared bush. The view across to Kingston is still there at the front, though. The current occupier, a scruffy-looking blue-eyed but black-skinned Jamaican, knows the story of the haunting, but declares he does not believe in ghosts, before adding, archly, 'How do you know I am not a ghost?'

For the next five days, Fleming and Bryce followed a routine of an early start down the mountain, the suppurating heat of the conference in the city, then the arduous climb in the dark back up to Bellevue, now equipped with the essential gin, 'foods with more variety, and baskets of gorgeous, unknown fruits'. But the weather never relented; Fleming wrote that 'it rained in rods'. Bryce remembered that 'little toadstools appeared in our leather shoes during the night'. He was depressed that Fleming had not been able to see the beauties of Bellevue or the island's other 'romantic' attractions, which he had described at length to his friend. 'I had hoped that Ian would love Jamaica and perhaps come and stay with us if the war ever ended,' he wrote. Sadly, Jamaica had been 'really dreadful'.

But as their plane climbed above Kingston, Fleming suddenly snapped his briefcase closed and turned to Bryce, announcing, 'Ivar, I have made a great decision. When we have won this blasted war, I am going to live in Jamaica. Just live in Jamaica and lap it up, and swim in the sea and write books.'

The successful opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympic Games presented for the consumption of a huge worldwide television audience a tableau of Britain's past, present and future. It was overwhelmingly positive – no mention was made of empire or slavery

– and was clearly aimed at projecting an idea of Britishness – quirky, creative, tolerant – that we could all celebrate.

The undisputed climax of the show was, of course, the Queen – and James Bond. The two great British anachronisms. Bond has an audience with the Queen at Buckingham Palace, and then together they appear to parachute into the Olympic stadium to the accompaniment of what must be the most recognisable theme tune in movie history.

It was very funny, and very surprising, that the Queen would agree to appear with this particular fictional character in a scene that poked fun at her age, with her stunt double parachuting in clutching a handbag. When the laughter had died down, though, hastened on its way by the frowning expression of the real Queen, who now appeared in the stands, there was another 'double-take' head-scratching moment: how on earth had Ian Fleming's James Bond ascended to such heights of national iconography?

The first James Bond novel was published in 1953, the same year as the coronation of Elizabeth II. The books have now sold more than sixty million copies. Despite this, it might be argued that it is the films rather than the novels that have had the greater cultural impact. But as Fleming's friend and first biographer John Pearson noted in 2003, what surprised him about the Bond films 'is how much of Ian they retain … it is Ian's character that appears to have set the inescapable parameters for all the James Bond movies'.

The Queen aside, not much remains from Fleming's 1940s and 1950s, when Britain still had an empire. Much else has been discarded: popular music, art, film and, more importantly, attitudes to women, sexuality and race. But we keep Bond. What does that say about Fleming, and indeed about us?

Bond was created not only a long time ago, but also far away. For two months of every year, from 1946 to his death eighteen years later, Ian Fleming lived at the house he built on Jamaica's north coast on a

point of high land overlooking a small white sand beach with a coral reef close by. All of his James Bond novels and stories were written here, at Goldeneye. This is the recurring birthplace of the patriotic imperial hero who puts Britain back on top and projects British power across the world.

Imperial, then post-imperial Jamaica contributes a vivid setting for three of these novels and a number of the short stories, as well as cropping up referenced in almost all of Fleming's other books. Indeed, Fleming's adventures underwater on his Goldeneye reef – a place of both beauty and danger – inspired some of the very best Bond scenes. More than that, the spirit of the island – its exotic beauty, its unpredictable danger, its melancholy, its love of exaggeration and gothic melodrama – infuses the stories.

In fact, many of the 'ingredients' that Fleming threw together in the warm bedroom of Goldeneye to create Bond – the high-end jet-set tourism world in which his hero moves, the relentless attention to race, the aching concern with the end of the Empire and national decline, the awkward new relationship with the United States, even the Cold War – all these roads lead back to Jamaica.

In 1965, a year after Fleming's death at just fifty-six, John Pearson visited Goldeneye for the first time. 'This really is Flemingland,' he scribbled in his notebook. 'It is the place where he wrote and the place he wrote about. His ghost is stronger here than anywhere else.' Pearson concluded that only in Jamaica could Fleming 'relax, be as much of himself as there was'. This echoes a comment made a decade earlier by the writer Peter Quennell, who was a frequent guest at Goldeneye in the fifties: 'In Jamaica Ian seemed perfectly at home,' he wrote, 'if he could be said ever to be really at home in any place he inhabited.'

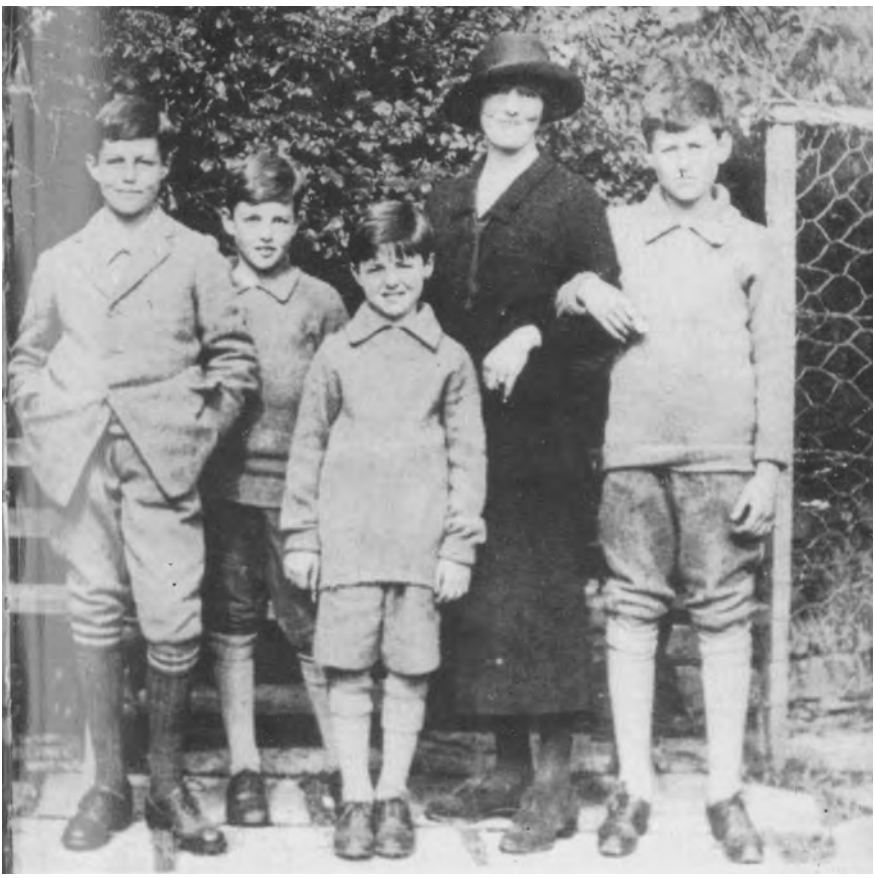
To understand Fleming's relationship with the place so crucial to his creativity, we need to explore the huge changes occurring as the island, a microcosm for the wider empire, transformed itself and its

relationship with Fleming's Britain. For it is Jamaica that offers the key to a fresh understanding of Fleming, Bond and our own strange relationship with this national icon.

Ian Fleming had found something in Jamaica that was irresistible, a combination of factors that made the island fit his awkward personality. In an interview close to the end of his life he described himself as 'rather melancholic and probably slightly maniacal as well … Possibly it all began with an over-privileged childhood.' He was born on 28 May 1908, the second of four sons, and was a naughty, difficult, restless child. His background was contradictory and complex: both 'new money' and establishment, puritan and hedonistic. His grandfather Robert Fleming had risen from a humble background in Dundee to found a bank and accumulate a fortune investing in American railroads. Although he was famously parsimonious, never taking a taxi in his life, the family acquired a town house in London and rolling acres and a mansion in Oxfordshire. A shooting estate in Scotland was rented for 'country pursuits'. Ian's father Valentine attended Eton and Oxford, trained as a lawyer and became a country gentleman, with his own pack of beagles. In 1910 he was elected as a Conservative MP for the Henley division of Oxfordshire, becoming a close friend of Winston Churchill, a fellow MP and officer in the Oxfordshire Yeomanry.

In spite of his lack of enthusiasm for outdoor gentry pursuits, Ian seems to have been his father's favourite; Val called his second son 'Johnny' and spoiled him. The young Ian was endlessly curious about nature, from the highest birds to the lowest insects, but was not so keen on killing. He later wrote: 'If I have to make a choice, I would rather catch no salmon than shoot no grouse.' When he 'should have been out doors killing something', he preferred listening to Hawaiian guitar music, he later remembered, in particular the exotic tropical rhythms of the Royal Hawaiian Serenaders.

His mother Eve was a very different creature to her husband's austere Scottish family. A striking bohemian beauty, she was vain, self-centred and extravagant. Her two brothers were notorious womanisers and rakes. Eve was also domineering. Her granddaughter Lucy Williams remembers her as 'quite a frightening woman … beautiful and immaculate, she pierced you with beady eyes'. She had a tendency publicly to humiliate her sensitive second son. A picture of Eve Fleming with her boys shows them all smiling except Ian, who has his arm awkwardly wrapped around his mother's, with a posture half dependent and half resentful.



The Fleming boys, from left: Peter, Richard, Michael and Ian, with their mother Eve.