The purpose of this book is to show that the English literary past, at least, is indeed another country where, in a way that is now almost lost to us, “speculation about the authorship [of novels] was part of what it was to read” (6). Until the dawn of the twentieth century, the vast majority of English and Scottish novels were published anonymously or pseudonymously – in the case of the latter the chosen nom de plume may well have contained deliberate clues as to the identity of the author, suggesting that it was not always the intention for it be a permanent secret. Both readers and critics took immense pleasure in attempting attribution and in penetrating the disguises in which authors cloaked themselves. The sheer prevalence of authorial anonymity was mapped in the 19th century in a nine-volume dictionary by Samuel Halkett and John Laing (which was updated in 1956 and 1962), but Mullan offers his book as the first history of the phenomenon.

Over the years, the first readers of many famous literary works have been invited to unravel their secret histories. A good proportion of what is now English literature consists of works first published [...] without their author’s names. These works are now collected in bookshops and libraries under the names of those who wrote them, but the processes by which they were attributed to their authors has largely been forgotten. It is strange to think of Joseph Andrews or Pride and Prejudice or Frankenstein being read without knowing the identities of their creators, but so once they were (4).

To this list one could add Gulliver’s Travels (and all other of Jonathan Swift’s satirical writing), the first dozen of Sir Walter Scott’s best selling novels. Both writers preserved their anonymity even from publishers and printers by having collaborators copy their manuscripts, so that their handwriting would not be recognised. Their aim in both cases, according to Mullan, was to foster attentive discussion of the political and historical issues in their work, without having to be personally identified with them – the very fact of anonymity was thought to produce more diligent reading, as readers sought line by line to identify the writers concerned. Scott occasionally reviewed his own novels under a pseudonym, and in the nineteenth century reviewing generally was an anonymous activity, which allowed for very scurrilous things to be said of a book without fear of libel, but also allowed authors to promote their own work. In the twentieth century Anthony Burgess sometimes promoted his own novels with pseudonymous reviews, but nowadays the practice of anonymous reviewing survives only in the magazines The Economist and Private Eye.

Mullan devotes separate chapters to women writing as men and men writing as women, telling us why, and also demonstrates the lengths writers of potentially seditious literature - from John Locke to Daniel Defoe - would go to hide their identities. The book is rich in detail about the strategies used by individual authors in particular times and places but offers no single theory of anonymity – perhaps because no single theory would do justice to the complexity of the circumstances in which anonymity is sought.

Nonetheless buried in the details of this book is a story about the psychological significance of personal names and changing conceptions of privacy between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Defoe’s heroine Moll Flanders withholding of her “true name” from “her” readers, may at first sight seem similar in intent to the Rev C L Dodgson’s determination not to let his readers know that he was Lewis Carrol, but whereas Moll had no need of a fixed name in the course of her adventures, the Oxford mathematician was very attached to his, and deliberately protected his privacy with the smokescreen of a pseudonym.

The story of Eric Blair’s opting for the pseudonym George Orwell is covered in a few pages, but tells Orwell aficionados little that they will not have gleaned from other sources. The choice seemingly derived from a mix of anxieties about his family’s anticipated reaction to his first book, Down and Out in London and Paris, his own dissatisfaction with it and an inchoate (possibly ambivalent) desire to distance himself from his middle class, “old Etonian” background. Blair, however, never disguised the fact that it was a pseudonym, and most publishers and reviewers of his work knew this. Well before the publication of Nineteen Eighty Four “George Orwell” became his “universally acknowledged identity” (292), but inwardly he seems to have continued to think of himself as Eric Blair.

Anonymous publication of novels declined in the twentieth century – Mullan does not exactly say why – but when it occurs it elicits the same kind of determined curiosity to expose the author as it did in the past, which is usually (not always) satisfied much faster. The one contemporary example on which Mullan dwells – Joe Klein’s (1996) Primary Colours, a thinly disguised novel about Bill Clinton’s presidency – was easily exposed by an academic specialist in computer analysis of literary styles, who quickly singled out Newsweek columnist (and Clinton confidant) Klein from thirty five potential candidates whose work he studied. One might infer from this that anonymity was simply easier to preserve in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than it is now, given the vast resources of both governments and corporate news agencies, but that too is a story that requires more explication than Mullan gives it.

Anonymity provides useful source material for the student of Surveillance Studies, but its themes would need to be theorised more sociologically before it could be really useful. Readers of this journal may nonetheless know, or wish to know, that at least one contemporary surveillance novel, a technothriller extrapolating from the 2002 Bush/Poinidexter plans for “total information awareness” has been written pseudonymously precisely to strengthen the point that our privacy is severely threatened. Mullan does not discuss The Traveller (2005) by “John Twelve Hawks,” but it is the first volume in a projected trilogy, set a few years hence, and has already become a bestseller. In it, an ancient Illuminati-like secret society is on the brink of achieving complete but mostly covert control of western populations through a capacity to access, integrate and if necessary hack the world’s burgeoning surveillance systems. Various characters, and Twelve Hawks himself, disparagingly portray it as a colossal electronic version of Bentham’s Panopticon. Its enemies – the handful of people who even know of its existence – call it the “vast machine” (an homage to William Burroughs, who coined this term) and try, with ever increasing difficulty to live “off the grid,” beyond its baleful reach.

The pseudonymous Twelve Hawks garners kudos among his readers by living “off the grid” himself – proving that it can be done, to some extent at least. Despite much internet speculation he remains unidentified – though there are some names in the frame – and his continuing anonymity has arguably added a frisson of interest to a somewhat non-descript book. He is consciously emulating the purpose of Nineteen Eighty Four, explaining in an essay appended to the novel that post-9/11political configurations are calling forth surveillance technologies way beyond those of Orwell’s imagination:

> two modern conditions – a generalised fear coupled with sophisticated electronic monitoring – shapes the world of The Traveller. The novel is set towards the end of this decade, but all the technological aspects described in the book are either in use at this moment or far along in the development process. I didn’t write to predict the future. I wanted to use the power of fiction to describe how we live now. (592)
Twelve Hawks admits that he does not actually “believe that a shadowy group of illuminati are guiding the industrial world” (p 602) but invites us to imagine what it might be like if a malevolent elite really did have our present surveillance technologies at their disposal. The Traveller uses the artifice of fiction – in particular, the tropes and motifs of technothrillers – to make a stronger emotional case against surveillance than might have been achieved with a factually-based polemic (of which there are already many). It is not enough that we simply understand surveillance, he tells us, we must actively resist it, because “no outside force will save us. We must look into our own hearts to find the […] the prophets and warriors – who will keep us free” (p605). Twelve Hawks anonymity is infused with the mysterious possibility that he just might be someone who knows more than we do; it insulates him from easy accusations of scaremongering, and his affected desperation cannot be as discounted quite as casually as it probably would be if his identity were out in the open.