The Reputation of Ford Madox Ford

by Bernard Bergonzi

If Ford Madox Ford is more widely read and discussed today than he was a few years ago, then most of the credit must go to the Americans. In the late thirties, Ford's reputation was at an absolute nadir in England, only twenty years after he had been at the centre of the metropolitan literary scene. The *English Review*, which Ford edited between 1908 and 1910, was one of the most distinguished publications ever to appear in the English-speaking world: the contributors to the first issue included Hardy, James, Conrad, Galsworthy, W. H. Hudson, Tolstoy, and Wells, while later numbers included the first published work of D. H. Lawrence and Wyndham Lewis. Ford may, indeed, have been half-remembered as a great editor, but his own creative achievement as a novelist was resolutely disregarded. Thus, Mr Cyril Connolly's *Enemies of Promise*, first published in 1938, contains a useful chronological list of key works of modern literature published between 1900 and 1932. If we look up the entry for the year 1915, we see titles by Norman Douglas, Ronald Firbank, and Somerset Maugham, but no word of Ford's masterpiece, *The Good Soldier*. Again, Mr Connolly gives a very comprehensive list of books for the years 1924 to 1928, but says nothing of *Some Do Not* and the other sections of Ford's long novel about Christopher Tietjens, now known collectively as *Parade's End*. And *Parade's End* is certainly regarded in America as one of the major achievements of modern English fiction.

When Ford died in the summer of 1939, *The Times Literary Supplement* published a rather grudging obituary notice, which treated Ford – who was only sixty-six when he died – as if he were a forgotten minor survival from some unimaginably remote literary epoch:

> Had he died even twelve years ago serious appraisals would have been made of his practice of criticism – not, perhaps, of his value as poet and novelist, for his work in those arts had begun to date twenty years ago: they were steeped deeply in the ancient ways of romance.

It is hard to believe that the writer of those words had the slightest familiarity with Ford's major fiction, let alone any real understanding of it. Nothing could be less 'steeped deeply in the ancient ways of romance' than the austere, intricate, painful narrative of *The Good Soldier*. Nowadays one can expect a more informed response. Ford has always had a powerful English advocate in Mr Graham Greene, and under Mr Greene's sponsorship an adequate selection of Ford's

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writings has been published by the Bodley Head, including *The Good Soldier*, *Parade's End*, an historical trilogy, *The Fifth Queen*, and extracts from his poetry and memoirs. Yet odd omissions continue to occur. Thus, in Mr G. S. Fraser's excellent guide to twentieth century English literature, *The Modern Writer and His World* – of which the most recent edition came out in 1964 – there is a fleeting reference to Ford as an editor, but no hint that he is to be regarded primarily as an important novelist. (In fairness to Mr Fraser I should add that he has told me that he regrets this omission, and hopes to remedy it in a future edition of his book).

And even where Ford is not ignored one has the feeling that he is more acknowledged than read. At least he does not yet seem to have achieved the status of a prescribed author for A-level English Literature texts, like Forster and Lawrence. When I included Ford in a university course on twentieth century fiction, the reaction of students was a genuine appreciation of his work, coupled with mild surprise that they had never even heard of him before.

In America, however, the situation is very different. At least four critical books on Ford have recently appeared there, together with a bibliographical study. And now we have two more contributions by American scholars: *The Life and Work of Ford Madox Ford* by Frank MacShane, and *Letters of Ford Madox Ford* edited by Richard M. Ludwig.[1] Mr MacShane's book is a well-ordered, workmanlike study of Ford's public career, or careers, for in the course of his life Ford was the focus of three separate centres of literary activity. First, in pre-war London as editor of the *English Review* and as a benevolent friend of Imagism, Vorticism, and other *avant-garde* movements. After the First World War, Ford re-established himself as a man of letters and patron of the experimental arts among the brilliant expatriates of Paris. The *Transatlantic Review*, which Ford founded there in 1924, was another highly distinguished magazine, though his editorship lasted for no more than a year. Finally, Ford was something of a literary hero to the Southern Agrarian group in America during the thirties; for the last two years of his life he was a professor at Olivet College, Michigan. All these phases are well documented in Mr MacShane's biography and in the letters. Mr MacShane states, however, that he does not wish to add to the information about Ford's personal life contained in Douglas Goldring's more intimate biography, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite*, published in 1948. To that extent Mr MacShane's biography supplements Goldring's but does not supplant it.,

There is a sense, of course, in which this American academic devotion to Ford may owe something to the relentless need of American graduate students to find new worlds to conquer, or fresh topics to write dissertations about. There is an element of truth in this, but it

[1]Frank MacShane, *The Life and Work of Ford Madox Ford*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965, 40*s*.; Richard M. Ludwig (Ed.) *Letters of Ford Madox Ford*, Princeton–O.U.P., 1965, 68*s*.

would, I think, be excessively cynical to dismiss the current American interest in Ford as no more than a product of the inflationary demands of the graduate schools. The fact is that British and American literary taste is significantly different in a number of ways, and this is particularly apparent in attitudes to technique. American readers and writers – and not only academics – are keenly interested in technical considerations, whereas the British tend to find these boring and, if pushed too hard, rather an embarrassment. Hence the unending American interest in Joyce – the supreme literary technician of all time – a figure whom many English readers find too strong in gimmicks and too weak in moral seriousness. Ford, too, is an author who offers enormous technical interest to the student of modern fiction. The way the first-person narrative works in *The Good Soldier*, where the true meaning of events has to be construed from the duped and unreliable consciousness of the story-teller John Dowell, is one example of this. Another is Ford's virtuoso use of the time-shift in parts of *Parade's End*, a technique which Ford worked out in collaboration with Conrad but which, if anything, he used more adroitly than Conrad. These are questions which interest American readers more strongly than English ones.

But the American interest in Ford is far from simply academic, and involves more than a sympathetic sharing of his passionate concern with form and method in fiction. During his years in America he aroused a genuine personal devotion in a number of his fellow-writers, including poets like William Carlos Williams and Allen Tate, and this has helped to keep alive the memory of his work there. Among the pleasantest aspects of Mr MacShane's biography are the poetic tributes by American poets that form the epigraphs to some of the chapters: the whole book is prefaced with a poem in memory of Ford by Robert Lowell, who had come to know him while still an undergraduate:

> But master, mammoth mumbler, tell me why
> the bales of your left-over novels buy
> less than a bandage for your gouty foot.
> Wheel-horse, O unforgetting elephant,
> I hear you huffing at your old Brevoort,
> Timon and Falstaff, while your heap the board
> for publishers. Fiction! I'm selling short
> your lies that made the great your equals. Ford,
> you were a kind man and you died in want.

As we have seen, the English response to Ford was very different. In 1922 Ford had left England for good and he returned only on brief visits. He was not alone in finding the British post-war climate insupportable: Ezra Pound, who had looked on London as the cultural hub of the universe when he arrived there in 1908 took the first opportunity of leaving it after the war ended. So, too, did D. H. Lawrence and Richard Aldington. Expatriation has been an essential

element in the literature of the modern movement, and the English were the hosts of some of its most distinguished practitioners: Conrad, James, Eliot, in particular, and for some of their most formative years, Pound and Yeats. If Thomas Hardy, chronicling the life of Wessex from a house he built for himself in the heart of Dorset, can serve as a symbol of the traditional close relationship between writer and material, then James Joyce, immersing himself more and more deeply in the life of Dublin, from successive exiles in Trieste, Zurich, and Paris, indicates the deliberate alienation of the modernist expatriate.

The Americans have, on the whole, regarded their expatriates with tolerance, despite the resentment of someone like Van Wyck Brooks against Henry James, or William Carlos Williams' bitter accusations that Eliot had betrayed American poetry to the enslavements of Europe. Most of the major American writers of the first thirty years of this century had some experience of expatriate existence; the only notable exception was William Faulkner who throughout his life preserved a physical closeness to his subject matter that made him remarkable amongst twentieth century novelists. The British, however, have a habit of withdrawing favour from writers who decide to live elsewhere, and this, I think, is one reason why Ford's reputation slumped so disastrously in the twenties and thirties. D. H. Lawrence offers something of a similar case: the general neglect of his work in the thirties must owe something to his disappearance from English literary circles, though it is also true that it suffered disastrously by being cut off from his imaginative and emotional roots. A lesser but instructive instance is the poet and novelist Richard Aldington: his novel *Death of a Hero*, which was something of an anti-English manifesto (and which, incidentally, contains a malicious portrait of Ford in his pre-war days), aroused a good deal of interest in 1929, but after that Aldington was largely neglected. His vividly interesting autobiography, one of his best books, appeared in America in 1941, but has never found an English publisher. Ford had similar experiences with his late books, and in one of his letters he suggests that is would hardly be worth bringing out an English edition of one of his books, since it would sell so badly. To take another example: I imagine that the stature of Robert Graves would have been recognised a lot sooner if it had not been for his deliberate exile of the last thirty-eight years. (Though the career of Somerset Maugham suggests that if one is solidly established in public esteem it doesn't much matter where one chooses to live.)

In his biography Mr MacShane provides some plausible clues to the British rejection of Ford. When Ford edited the *English Review* his critical standards were so high that he offended some of the most influential reviewers and moulders of opinion by refusing to print their work. Subsequently, Mr MacShane suggests, they took their revenge on Ford by refusing to countenance him as a serious writer. Knowing the way metropolitan literary life works it does not seem an extrava-

gant notion. Ford was certainly not helped by his infallible capacity for making a mess of his private life – and often a sadly public mess. In 1910 he was sued by his wife for 'restitution of conjugal rights', and spent ten days in Brixton prison for defying a court order. Literary London was sharply divided over this scandal, and the majority turned against Ford, including Henry James, whom he had always regarded as a friend, and who had used Ford as a model for Merton Densher in *The Wings of the Dove*.

On all the evidence, Ford does seem to have been unjustly treated, and his troubles were most marked during the First World War, as his letters show; they were later transmuted into the tribulations of Christopher Tietjens. But the evidence is still rather scanty; Ford was a generous man and a dedicated lover of the arts and encourager of the young. But he was also a snob and something of a braggart, or, as we might say nowadays, a 'role-player'. Possibly the sympathetic portrayals by Douglas Goldring and Mr MacShane need to be complemented by Aldington's representation of Ford as Mr Shobbe:

> Shobbe was an excellent example of the artist's amazing selfishness and vanity. After the comfort of his own person he really cared for nothing but his prose style and literary reputation. He was also an amazing and very amusing liar – a sort of literary Falstaff.

There may well have been something about Ford's personality that invited rebuff and irritation; at all events, like Falstaff, he was rejected. This question is not of merely biographical interest: it is desirable to know something about the context in which a writer's work was first read – or not read – if we are to grasp all its aspects.

H. G. Wells quarrelled with Ford over the running of the *English Review*, but he retained a certain respect for him and defended him against a malicious attack during the course of the war. In his *Experiment in Autobiography* Wells places the half-German Ford in the company of that group of illustrious aliens who lived within a few miles of each other in Kent in the early 1900's and whose friendship Wells had enjoyed for a while; they included Ford, James, Conrad, and Stephen Crane. Wells writes half-affectionately, half-dismissively, about their extreme devotion to the novel as an aesthetic form and what he regarded as a characteristic exoticism in their approach to life and letters. Their attitude to the novel was very different from his; and in this respect he was speaking for a great many readers. Wells and Galsworthy, Lawrence and Forster, write at very different levels of artistic seriousness, but they all write from a fairly central concern with English life and manners. Compared with these, Ford does seem exotic; he grew up in a cosmopolitan, highly artistic household, and when he wanted to depict Christopher Tietjens, a stolid member of the Yorkshire squirearchy, he had to do so from little extensive knowledge of that class. In fact, his friend Arthur Marwood served as an adequate model, and the character of Tietjens is a *tour de force*. Tietjens is used by Ford as the focus for a rather romantic portrayal of the crack-up of

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traditional English aristocratic values, which works by suggestion and implication rather than by direct realism. Americans were accustomed to imagining English society in this heightened and selective way, whereas English readers might find it a distorted picture.

As we have seen, there is one English novelist who has preserved a life-long admiration for Ford: Mr Graham Greene, who has written of *The Good Soldier*; 'I don't know how many times in nearly forty years I have come back to this novel of Ford's, every time to discover a new aspect to admire.' Mr Greene also admires James and Conrad, and shows this admiration in his novels. Although he has only recently become an expatriate, he has found much of his material in faraway places; when he does write about the English scene he throws a strange, exotic light on Brighton or the London suburbs. There is, I think, an unmistakable debt to Ford in Mr Greene's fiction: a character like Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter* has a striking resemblance to Ashburnham in *The Good Soldier*, a novel whose influence is also evident in the careful construction and intense sexual anguish of *The End of the Affair*. Ford's concern with the dark side of Catholicism, as manifested by Leonora Ashburnham and Sylvia Tietjens, would also have a profound appeal for Mr Greene.

But in this creative debt to Ford Mr Greene is alone in this country. In general, Ford's exotic conception of English life, and his highly conscious artistry, mean that he still hasn't properly 'taken' with English readers. I think that before long, his peculiar genius will be more widely recognised, though I doubt if he will ever be really popular in England. In the meantime, one must salute the American energy now being devoted to him, as manifested in the admirable labours of Mr MacShane and Mr Ludwig. It might even be a useful strategy for us to read Ford as if he were, after all, an American novelist of a rather special kind.