

Max Saunders

Ford Madox Ford, A Dual Life, Volume I, The World Before the War, pp.632, and Volume II, The After-War World, pp.696,

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All but forgotten in the 1940s and '50s, Ford's work first began to attract renewed interest in the 1960s. Graham Greene, long an admirer of Ford, was one of the prime movers behind the publication in 1962 by Bodley Head of the major novels, which he also edited. Greene's edition ran to four volumes, joined in 1971 by a fifth, edited by Michael Killigrew. *The Letters of Ford Madox Ford*, edited by Richard Ludvig, were published by Princeton in 1965. A miscellaneous collection of writings including selected poems and unpublished letters, edited by Sondra J. Stang, came out with the title *The Ford Madox Ford Reader* in 1986 (Manchester, Carcanet).

A long tradition of exclusively U.S. academic interest in Ford studies was broken in 1996 when Robert Hempson and Max Saunders organised an international conference at London University's Senate House, the first dedicated entirely to Ford ever to be held in Britain. Today the academic attention enjoyed by Ford continues to grow steadily, as at last does the critical focus on the culture in which he played so large a part before his move to Paris in the 1920s - we need only think of the leading writers associated with Ford's *The English Review (1908-10)*. Confirmation of the healthy state of Ford studies comes from the plans for systematic reprinting, not only of the novels, but also of a large part of Ford's huge output of essays, notes, memories and other writings. Everyman has republished a paperback edition of his fascinating and unjustly neglected essay "The Soul of London" (1995). Ford's masterpiece *The Good Soldier* has been reprinted by no less than four separate publishers in the space of only a few years: Everyman's Library (London, 1991), jointly edited by Ford's most recent biographers, Alan Judd and Max Saunders; Oxford University Press (1990), edited by Thomas C. Moser, author of the Freudian interpretation of Ford's life through his fiction; the Norton Critical Edition (with a full textual apparatus, prepared by Martin Stannard in 1995 and to date the most authoritative edition available) and lastly Carcanet (Manchester, 1996), which has also announced paperback editions of a good many of the seventy-nine volumes of Ford's massive *corpus*. Alan Judd attended the 1989 conference organised by Vita Fortunati in Bologna, whose proceedings were published as *Scrittura e Sperimentazione in Ford Madox Ford*, edited by Raffaella Baccolini and Vita Fortunati (Florence, Alinea Editrice, 1994). A year after the Bologna conference Judd, who is also a novelist, published a biography (*Ford Madox Ford*, London, Collins, 1990, reprinted in a less expensive edition by Flamingo in 1991) which addressed a general readership but was nonetheless of considerable quality.

Saunders, on the other hand, took a further six years to bring out his own, vastly more wide-ranging and ambitious attempt to combine biography with the results of more than a decade of critical study, in the two-part *Ford Madox Ford - A Dual Life: Volume I, The World Before the War*, pp.632, and Volume II, *The After-War World*, pp.696, Oxford University Press, 1996.

The most authoritative biography before Saunders was Mizener's *The Saddest Story - A Biography of Ford Madox Ford* (1971). This had already laid to rest some of the legends which grew out of the wealth of anecdotes and diaries of the 1920s, '30s and '40s, such as the reminiscences of Violet Hunt, and above all Douglas Goldring's eye-witness account in *South Lodge* (1943) and *The Last Pre-Raphaelite* (1948). Max Saunders was able to take full advantage of important documents that have only recently become available, notably the letters of Joseph Conrad edited by Fredric Karl and the Pound/Ford correspondence edited by Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, both essential in order to bring into focus Ford's relationship with the Polish-born novelist and the "impresario" of modernism. The chief merit of Saunders' approach is that he has referred to the primary sources, painstakingly searching through archives and tracking down unpublished diaries and other writings, scrupulously correcting errors and inaccuracies (in part recently reiterated by Judd), and that he has made full use of other available material through his researches at Cornell University, which holds the largest collection of Ford's manuscripts, and the specialised libraries at Princeton and Yale. Throughout the whole length of the two volumes there is barely a single item of information or biographical speculation which is not given documentary support, or is at least compared with the views of previous critics and biographers, in the extensive notes to each chapter. More often than not, it is Saunders' suggestions which appear the most convincing.

It seems impossible that anything of value can be added to our knowledge of Ford's complicated biography, now that Saunders has sifted through and collated every relevant detail, setting down all ascertainable information and giving voice to the abundant direct or indirect testimony of those who played a prominent part in the various phases of Ford's (emotionally stormy) life story, while carefully comparing and contrasting their accounts with the possible overall perspectives.

One single episode may suffice as an instance of the exhaustiveness of Saunders' biographical method: his reconstruction (aided, it should be noted, by the prior research carried out by Carole Angier) of the affair between Ford, Stella Bowen and Jean Rhys. He traces their triangular relationship not only in Bowen's accounts, but also in the fictionalised elaboration of the other two partners (*Postures* by Rhys, and Ford's *When the Wicked Man*), not forgetting the novel by Jean Lenglet (Rhys' Dutch husband), *Sous les verrous*. It is on such occasions, or when Saunders dwells at equally detailed length on Ford's social life in London, Paris and America, that the reader might wish for a more selective and succinct approach. The more so since there is such urgency - far greater than in other, less demanding and wide-ranging biographies - for critical analysis of the subject at hand. The critical argument which does emerge from the two volumes, so

far from being episodic or sacrificed to the meticulous inventory of biographical fact, could easily stand independently. Indeed the specifically critical content is remarkable for its systematic coverage of virtually the whole of Ford's vast and many-faceted output, including the part of it for which one could well bear the author in mind Jamesian-fashion as "le jeune homme modeste", rather than with the sedulous insistence in which Saunders sometimes (fortunately only rarely) indulges. The undoubtedly impressive result is that, if we want to learn something of Ford's hastily-written pot boilers and minor works, then it is to Saunders' "biography" that we must turn, because no other source provides such a wealth of information. It will come as no surprise, therefore, that Tony Tanner rightly hailed Saunders' work, from the appearance of the first volume, quite simply as absolutely the best book on Ford so far.

Leaving abstract judgements aside, we may give an idea of the sheer size of Saunders' exegetic effort by noting that the close analysis of *The Good Soldier* in Volume I takes up nearly seventy pages, and could fairly have been presented as a separate work in its own right. An equally penetrating and extensive account (taking up the whole of Ch. 14 in Vol. II) is allotted to another of Ford's masterpieces which also deserves to be more widely read, the quartet *Parade's End*. Saunders joins with Malcolm Bradbury and other writers (William Carlos Williams, Anthony Burgess, etc.) in seeing in *Parade's End* not only an exemplary, essential text of 1920s modernism, but also the most important and complex English novel on the First World War. On the other hand he goes against the judgement of Graham Greene, who rejected the fourth part of the saga as unworthy of the quality of the first three (a decision in which he was influenced by Ford's own misgivings as to the true value of the final novel of the series). Saunders has preferred to restore the controversial happy ending formed by *Last Post* (1928), as the indispensable thematic and sequential conclusion. Overall, Saunders has identified in Ford's extraordinary narrative machinery (and in his personal 'architectonic intelligence') the echoes of James, Conrad and Dostoevsky. He has also cogently noted how Ford's elegiac lyricism, rather Tory in feel and quite undeniably characteristic, is constantly menaced by horror and despair in the face of issues whose tragic, comic and absurd sides he is fully aware of. As a critic with the simultaneous task of unravelling the complex web of his subject's life, Saunders must have been sorely tempted to highlight biographical coincidence and motivation, limiting his interpretation of the texts to subservient transcriptions or as *romans à clef*. On the contrary, however, once he has exorcised the "biographical sourcery" which he rightly shuns, Saunders makes intelligently elastic use of biographical data, while remaining fully conscious of the immense transformation which these undergo in the course of the creative process. Another decidedly meritorious quality is the highly refined treatment given to the quality and frequency of the legendary "illuminative exaggerations" of the unreliable, unrepentant Ford - tongue-in-cheek entertainer and "great liar" - the flagrant distortions of fact which Saunders correctly suggests are more to be enjoyed than believed (Ch. 13, Vol. II).

There is, however, one aspect inadequately covered by the two volumes, or at least not awarded its proper perspective, and that is the overall context of artistic and intellectual influences. This context is essential if

we are to appreciate and define the poetics of Ford the proto-modernist and modernist, yet here it is present only sketchily or in outline, notwithstanding - including in Saunders' own account - the frequent recurrence to the famous "impressionist" technique. Indeed, we may document how topical was the idea of osmosis between the arts, especially between writing and painting, from four crucial pieces written by Ford between 1913 and 1914 (*On Impressionism*), where the notion of "simultaneity" which appears in parallel with contemporary modernist experiments is anything but remote from the time-shift technique used in *The Good Soldier*. These veritable poetic manifestoes, which Saunders himself, referring to the first two, considers together and *pour cause* as "a milestone essay" (Vol. I, p.375), ought to have provided the core for a discussion of the innovative formal renewal through which, with "impressionism", imagism, cubism, futurism and vorticism, Ford was then steering a path, as were the young contributors to his *English Review* (Lawrence, Pound, Wyndham Lewis). An interest in painting was in any case a constant in Ford, if only because of his background and original training. Here, however, there is no trace of Ford the assiduous visitor to art galleries, nor of the reviewer of Marinetti's declamations to London audiences. More consideration should surely have been given to the fact that, well before the figurative arts took on a dominant role, inviting the most experimental writers to respond to the challenge of new models, Ford had already proved his early inclination for the arts, and especially for painting, when recreating the Pre-Raphaelite ambience both in his biography of his maternal grandfather *Ford Madox Brown* (1896) and in his book on *The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (1907). He also wrote an important study, *Holbein*, in as early as 1905. The "intellectual" dimension of the biography ought really to have complemented its factual and "critical" sides with an account - especially in the light of its influence on Ford (who was in Paris at the time) - of that typically European and continental movement termed, in literature as in other areas, the *rappel à l'ordre*. Although he does not mention it specifically, Saunders himself seems to have the concept in mind when he underlines the central importance of the myth of rebirth in *Parade's End*, linking it to "post-war ideas of 'reconstruction' and regeneration" (Vol. II, pp.256/7) . This was a phenomenon fully born out in the narrative poetic which informs *Parade's End*. We need only consider the concepts used by Ford: such symptomatic terms as "reconstruction" and "order", following on the pre-War dissolution of traditional forms and values; or we may recall the writer's ever more pressing need to "to tell a story", expressed in his frequent recourse to an omniscient narrator and leading to the re-establishment of a compromise between "impressions" and those bonds of cause and effect which he had experimentally loosened or shaken off altogether before the War, at the time of *The Good Soldier*.

Moreover, in the milieux which Ford frequented in Paris (duly accounted for in detail by Saunders in Vol. II., the cosmopolitan Ford of the *Transatlantic Review*, which featured reproductions of Braque and Man Ray), the names which figure most frequently - and not just by virtue of meteoric appearances at parties and *soirées* - are those of major painters, an illustrious catalogue including such as Juan Gris, Picasso, Matisse, Picabia (the latter two, incidentally, are absent from the otherwise accurate and well-organised index), Marcel Duchamp, Constantin Brancusi... In short, the Ford who wrote that "the vast majority of young writers are violently seeking a reconstructing, revivifying formula" ought perhaps to have prompted far

greater attention to the movement of return to order which so patently affected the author in the post-War period, in tune with all the other currents of modernism then active in Europe.

Lastly, another danger which may occasionally beset readers (including the author of this review) is quite simply that of losing the thread of the argument amid the vast mass of material assembled in the two volumes. Nor does this occur simply because of their length - which alone precludes an uninterrupted reading - but also because, as alluded to above, the biographical excursus, itself always so analytical, is held up at frequent intervals by the anything but marginal space given over to critical appraisal. The latter runs the risk of becoming, if not repetitive, then at least rather syncopated. By way of providing an instance of this, the subject of "literary personality" is given separate treatment twice within the same chapter (Ch. 23 in Vol. II). Although the discussion does vary slightly, it could surely have been more succinctly arranged. In order to characterise Ford's divided personality and the many contradictions and tensions inherent in his work, already underscored in the subtitle *A Dual Life* allotted to both volumes, Saunders makes frequent recourse to the formula "duality", and variants of the same. Although he has been duly rebuked for his excessive use of the term, it remains true that behind the sometimes irksome reiteration of the concept Saunders has conducted an analysis of Fordian ambivalence which goes right to the historical core of a figure poised between late Victorianism and modernity, capturing his deep anxieties and conflictual essence.

At all events, Saunders' biography must be acknowledged as the most authoritative account of Ford's life, and at one and the same time one of the most stimulating studies for an understanding of his work.

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