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Ford Madox Ford

A Dual Life

Max Saunders

Volume I: The World Before the War

Oxford, Oxford University Press, (1996) 2012

Paperback. 632p. ISBN 978-0-19-966834-2.

Volume II: The After-War World

Oxford, Oxford University Press, (1996) 2012

Paperback. 696p. ISBN 978-0-19-966835-9.

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Ford Madox Ford is usually best known for his collaboration with Joseph Conrad. Ford was a young man of 24 when he met Conrad in 1897, whereas the latter was already 40 and had acquired some fame as the author of *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and *Tales of Unrest*.

At the time Ford was still called Ford Hermann Hueffer. He became Ford Madox Ford in 1919, just four years after choosing to be called Ford Madox Hueffer, the name he had used to publish his writings since 1900. He was the son of Francis Hueffer, a German music critic. His maternal grand-father was Ford Madox Brown, the pre-Raphaelite painter. His Anglo-German origins are just the first ingredient of a complex personality that stands at the cross-roads of several countries, cultures and languages, as well as several artistic movements, as Max Saunders shows in his exhaustive biography.

Saunders insists that, in his childhood, Ford was surrounded by artists and intellectuals from all countries, including Russian anarchists. Such influences shaped him into a non-conformist in both political and religious terms, "able to invent a 'Toryism' which is free from party; a Catholicism that has more to do with Romance than with Rome" (Vol. 2, 506). At the end of his life, he refused to be published by a Nazi, he defended the Jewish cause and felt sympathy for left-wing ideology, yet he rejected any form of totalitarianism, including communism.

Ford's childhood also fostered a passion for arts and especially literature. It seemed both natural and inevitable for him to become a writer. Nevertheless he had to wait until the year 1915 for his talent to be favourably received by the public after the publication of what is considered as his masterpiece: *The Good Soldier*. Moreover, in

spite of the now acclaimed qualities of the novel as a precious illustration of modern fiction and narrative technique, it has long been neglected by literary criticism because of its overwrought, exuberant and unclassifiable style.

But Ford is not only a novelist. Because of his passion for arts, he was led to accomplish what we could call a mission towards other artists. He was the first to publish young and at the time unknown authors like D.H. Lawrence or Ezra Pound. He also published Thomas Hardy, H.G. Wells and Henry James in the *English Review* which he founded in 1908. Some years later he discovered Jean Rhys and promoted the works of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway.

Until the end of his life he was a friend to other artists, such as Graham Greene who admired him. When going on speaking tours in the USA and giving conferences at Olivet University, he even created “the Society of the Friends of William Carlos Williams” to help this author and others find a publisher, all this as late as 1939 and in spite of his very bad health. Ford died on 26 June 1939, some days after sailing back from New York to France where he had spent most of his time since leaving England in 1922.

Saunders shows therefore that Ford was the novelist we usually know, but he was also “the Poet, the Historian (...), the Art Critic, the Topographical and Nature Writer, the Literary Critic, the Travel Writer, the Cultural Commentator, the Autobiographer – often most of these in the same book” (Vol. 2, 461). This impression of excess and chaos explains the uneasiness with which one may approach his work and the mistrust of critical circles.

As a man too Ford often aroused suspicion rather than sympathy. If he kept some close friends like Pound, H.G. Wells or Greene, he also lost many. By way of example we can mention the collaboration with Conrad that came to an end after some tensions about the *English Review* and other more personal matters. In addition we could call to mind Hemingway’s lastingly critical and even contemptuous attitude towards Ford.

At some point, Saunders’s study, by lingering on these more intimate aspects – for instance when evoking Ford’s marriage, his feeling of guilt linked to the death of his father, his inextricable love affairs, his meeting new friends (and dining with them) or losing older friendships, his never-ending financial concerns – tends to offer an excessively close and detailed account of Ford’s life, with a somewhat psychologizing view of the man.

Yet the two-volume biography attempts and succeeds in a valuable rehabilitation of a writer who has often been deemed as minor, especially in relation or comparison to his masters: Joseph Conrad but also Henry James. Besides, Saunders aims at countering the accusation that Ford was a blunt liar: the duality of Ford Madox Ford, symbolized by his changing his name, accounts for the inaccuracies that can be traced out in the stories he told and retold, usually in a slightly modified version each time. According to Saunders, it is a gift rather than a sin, “the artist’s romance of the self” (Vol. 1, 1).

The author may insist too much on the notion that Ford was therefore not a liar, but that he relied on impressions rather than facts. Saunders quotes Ford who defined

his use of “impressionism” in his first autobiographical work, *Ancient Lights* (1911): “This book, in short, is full of inaccuracies as to facts, but its accuracy as to impressions is absolute [...] I don’t really deal in facts, I have for facts a most profound contempt” (Vol. 1, 5). Moreover, the repeated allusions to Ford’s impressionism in the two volumes of the biography tend to overshadow Saunders’s analyses of the narrative technique of the ground-breaking twentieth century author. The use of a term associated with nineteenth century visual arts could make us forget that in 1914 for instance “Ford was becoming more closely allied with the avant-garde” (Vol. 1, 462).

Yet, at the same time, Saunders manages to show how Ford’s prolific activity influenced artistic creation in his time: the collaboration with Conrad led to some remarkable evolution in the form of the novel (notably in the use of a first-person narrator and time-shifts); thanks to his “clear-sighted eclecticism” he discovered and revealed several young authors of the modern age. One should also remember his long friendship (in spite of growingly diverging ideological views) with the poet Ezra Pound whose writing Ford helped modernize in the early 1910’s. It is equally significant that Stella Bowen and Janice Biala, Ford’s last two companions, should have been painters.

Ford was a lover of art and a man of fiction. Life and art were never separate for him, so that he would “embroider” the stories he told – to use a Conradian image that appears in *Nostramo*, a novel to the writing of which Ford’s contribution is often underestimated. This ambivalence towards truth and verisimilitude is at the same time the source of his creative power. The complexity of his own life and art enabled him to explore the complex reality of life in general. This is why Saunders asserts that “Fordian doubleness is an exploration of psychological dualities rather than an expression of self-division” (Vol. 2, 397).

Such considerations allow the author to develop the interesting notion of biography as fiction, stressing that Ford called his *Joseph Conrad, A Personal Remembrance* (1924) a “novel”. This blurring of genres accounts for Ford’s unreliable storytelling about himself and others while it highlights the fact that his memoirs and historical works are pieces of art in themselves.

A final example of the strong and fruitful relation between life and fiction could be the structural significance of the war in Ford’s existence. “The war became – as it did for most combatants – the crucial event of Ford’s life” (Vol. 2, 15). The traumatic experience of war with the fear of death, the shell-shock that nearly killed him and the life that went on after it, gave birth to what is growingly recognized as Ford’s other masterpiece: *Parade’s End* (1924-1928), a tetralogy on the war, the breakup of English Society and the rise of modernism.