



Ford Madox Ford: a Memoir

ALTHOUGH I scarcely realized it at the time, my first meeting with Ford Madox Ford had a strong influence upon the direction of my developing interests and upon the ordering of those values by which I now seem to live. Ford was staying somewhere in the country outside London in 1923 (or thereabouts) and used very occasionally to come up to town for a day or a night. It was on one of these occasions that I found him one evening in a friend's flat in Lincoln's Inn. There were only three or four of us there, and the talk, as usual when Ford was present, turned largely on the arts and literature.

In appearance Ford was much the same then as we have known him of late years, large, loosely dressed, lethargic except for sudden, surprisingly quick, nervous movements and gestures, his hair a little sandier, his moustache perhaps a little more drooping over his not very mobile mouth, his blue eyes, alternately pale and vague or sparkling with a quick smile or with intense interest, the wheeze which gassing in the war left him, the attendant cough, the cigarette, the soft voice which could be surprisingly bold and alternately trail off into a mumble, the something about him of England and the country which persisted in spite of Paris, New York, and everything else.

He talked almost not at all about himself that evening. There were anecdotes, to be sure, told in the way which no one but Ford could do, with brilliant descriptive passages, subtly sharpened issues, and the point brought out in an emphasis of understatement so that the full flavor arose only slowly through a pause, a dawning smile, and finally a laugh. Ford would either merely smile himself and say mmm . . . but with a glinting light of enjoyment in his eyes, or else his laugh coming slowly would rock him until

the cough overtook him and you thought he might burst at any moment.

But he did talk about books, old ones and more especially new ones and the people who were writing them. Perhaps having an American in the company turned his thoughts in that direction, but I remember him speaking particularly about young American writers and what was going on in the way of a new literature in this country.

Now I had been carrying on for several years past in Oxford and in London a little lonely propaganda for American letters, especially modern ones, but it had been a rather discouraging job. Not that "the English" and especially my friends were being insular and stuffy about it. But few had yet begun to look to America as a land of literary or artistic promise. There were the "Americans in Paris," yes, but they seemed different somehow from what Somerset Maugham had referred to in "Our Betters" as "You Americans who live in America." And to be sure, a few hardy souls like Richard Hughes had actually been in the United States, and Sinclair Lewis was beginning to get about in England. But my small voice insisting from time to time that something was stirring on the other side of the Atlantic and that it was worth watching and knowing about, elicited a friendly and sympathetic but not very serious attention from my friends.

Suddenly, therefore, to find Ford, who knew more about the young writers, painters, and musicians, of the Continent than we, waving these more or less aside and talking about what was going on in America, and especially in my own Middle West, was tremendously exciting. Especially since he knew a very great deal more about what was going on than I did. I lapped it up and it was his enthusiasm, as I look back upon it now, that strengthened in me the convictions that I had slowly been arriving at out of my own transatlantic perspective as to the great potential significance of America and especially the Middle West for the next stages in the development of our western culture.

Later in New York, after the migrations from England had begun and Ford was making his periodic visits, although I believe we never discussed the subject directly, he served in his continued interest to strengthen further my feelings in regard to this part of the world.

When, therefore, a few years ago I embraced an opportunity to touch in a small way through education some of the sources of this vital thing which I feel working in the human soil of this region, it was fitting that Ford should come to be a yeast in our ferment. What he has meant in the life

of Olivet College during the past two years while he has been on the staff of our Writers Conference and occupying our Chair of Creative Literature, and in the region round about, through those ripples that go out from any educational institution, is equally an epitome of what he meant wherever he has lived. It is hard to set it down in words. Specific lectures, endless discussions, yes. Countless hours working on manuscripts with students and aspiring writers from all over the section, yes. But it was more just his presence amongst us and what he stood for, his passion for the "humaner letters," his insistence that quality and integrity, such as the true artist lives by, are the only things that count in civilization, his relish of life, his capacity for enjoyment of the *menus plaisirs*, his amazing self-discipline for work despite a contrary appearance of indolence (he always had "time" and yet in the tiny space of a year in Olivet he wrote his 1000-page "March of Literature,") and above all his indefatigable and spendthrift giving of himself to all who sincerely came to him for advice and help, both human and artistic. These are the things that impressed themselves upon the life of the College and upon all who came into close contact with him.

The arts of the world, the progress of Western culture, would not be today quite what they are had Ford Madox Ford not passed this way. Not only will his writings, especially "The Good Soldier" and the "Tietjens Saga," live in our literature, but his influence as novelist, editor, counselor will persist in the lives and works of a multitude whom he has helped in ways beyond compute. With a sure feeling for quality he battled all his life for the recognition of those artists whose genius he felt was unappreciated. In him the arts and artists of the Western world have lost a friend such as they have but seldom known.

Ford liked to think of himself in a paraphrase of Hokusai as "an old man mad about writing." Actually he was as young as Lao Tse and the newest undergraduate poet. A spirit like his never dies.

JOSEPH BREWER

Mr. Brewer is president of Olivet College.

Harry Leon Wilson (1867-1939)

THEY say that Harry Leon Wilson wrote his novel "The Spenders" because he wanted to get out of New York, which he thought the ugliest city in the world. "The Spenders" got him a summer in Colorado. (The incident in it of the miner and the Washington Cream Pie has always stuck in this commentator's

mind as one of the richest things in American fiction.) Everyone forgets that Wilson lived in New York for ten years in the nineties, editing *Puck*, first while Henry Cuyler Bunner was alive and then after Bunner's death. He liked better living in Paris later on, when he and Booth Tarkington and Julian Street would meet at the Dôme in the afternoon. It was south of Paris that he and "Tark" turned out their play, "The Man From Home," which ran six years after its start in Chicago in 1917.

It is, however, for Ma Pettengill, Bunker Bean, Ruggles of Red Gap, and Merton of the Movies that Harry Leon Wilson will long be remembered. Those characterizations put him into the front rank of American humorists who can write real novels. The dramatization of "Merton of the Movies," with Glenn Hunter; and the picturization of "Ruggles of Red Gap," with Charles Laughton, will also keep Wilson's name green with a less literary generation. He hailed from Illinois, was a stenographer to several biographers when he was a youngster—and that took him into the Sierras; lived in mining camps, and then began writing jokes and funny pieces. He ended as the true interpreter of the humorous side of an America now as dead as the get-rich-quick ambitions of the people in "The Spenders." But historians will have to go to Wilson, along with other novelists of the period, to know how it was.

Wilson was a wit and a traveler, and finally settled down at Carmel, California. He liked the West. He wrote robust, sardonic comedy. His is a sure place among the best American humorists—friends of the common man.

W. R. B.

Letters to the Editor

Objectivity and Emotional Bias

SIR:—Since reading Ruth McKenney's review of "Holyoke, Massachusetts: A Case History of the Industrial Revolution in America" by Constance M. Green, in *The Saturday Review* of June 10, I have read not only Mrs. Green's book but Miss McKenney's "Industrial Valley," as well.

As a resident of western Massachusetts and a long-time advocate of research into local history as an avocation for educated married women, I should under any circumstances have read the history of Holyoke. But it was the intellectually dangerous emotionalism implicit in Miss McKenney's review that led me to investigate her writings. The fact that at the Third Writers' Congress the representatives of the Booksellers' Guild of America gave "Industrial Valley" second place in the voting for "historical" books emphasizes the point I wish to make.

"In a dry, dispassionate, clinical style," writes Miss McKenney, in her review of "Holyoke, Massachusetts," "Miss Green proceeds to set down one of the most horrifying stories written in years." And further on Miss McKenney says, "Miss Green writes with such careful dryness, such precise lack of bias that I, at least, finally found the manner of the book infuriating. Must historians pretend they do not care whether children labor in the mills from sun-up to sun-down? Is it unscientific bias to attack city planners who erected tenements in the middle of farms? For my part, 'Holyoke' would be a much more effective book with more fire and fewer footnotes."

In the first place, if Mrs. Green's books were as dry and clinical as Miss McKenney contends, I doubt whether

she would have found it so "infuriating." Secondly, it would seem to me that by definition a case history is inevitably clinical or at least purely factual. The six years of research so admirably recorded in Mrs. Green's bibliography could not have been accomplished without a burning desire on her part to search out the truth. If the simple telling of that truth kindles the flames of action in the reader, the historian would indeed seem to have performed successfully a dual task. Mrs. Green is neither a journalist, a writer of fiction, nor a propagandist. "Industrial Valley" may well be the "Uncle Tom's Cabin" of the rubber strike, but who today turns to "Uncle Tom's Cabin" to learn the facts about pre-war slavery in the South?

It would be a pity if Miss McKenney's emotional bias kept readers of her review away from a book that is a milestone in the popular writing of history by women in this country.

MINA CURTISS.

Formerly Associate Professor of English at Smith College, Ashfield, Mass.

The Trees of Holyoke

SIR:—A little town, shelved-away in the western end of the state of Massachusetts, bending to the curve of the Connecticut and rising to the hills, has been done a little dirt.

In the June 10 issue of the *Saturday Review of Literature* Miss Ruth McKenney reviewed a book on Holyoke, Mass., and it seems to me that though the purpose of the book is undeniably sincere, "the dark picture of Holyoke is quite unrelieved"—indeed.

The town may not have enjoyed the advantages of capitalist surplus wealth. I suppose they did take their money back to Boston with them. But, if I recall correctly, Holyoke refused the Carnegie Library offered it and built its own. As to schools, hospitals, and such, I wouldn't say that they are noticeably lacking.

In the beginning the industrialists may have built the town ugly. I wasn't around then. How they "kept the town ugly" is something which ought to make many Holyoke people step outside their doors and wonder about. Perhaps they've walked through its streets in the past without actually seeing what they saw.

That conservative newspaper mentioned in the review may be conservative to Miss Green, the author, or to Miss McKenney. But a remark like that in Holyoke would be good for a laugh.

And I suggest that if Miss McKenney really wants to see trees, old and gnarled, tall, stately, leafy, and all the rest, let her go to Holyoke. The trees, in my opinion, are its great merit, its impassioned rebellion against

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"Okay, okay, I'll apply for a scholarship!"