

FORD MADOX FORD

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"This is the saddest story I have ever heard." With this haunting sentence Ford Madox Ford began what he always considered his best novel, *The Good Soldier*. One of his biographers considered Ford's the saddest story, and used the phrase as the title of his life of the writer.

He lived from 1873 to 1939, published over eighty books, knew everyone. His grandfather was a painter, his father a musicologist, he was related by marriage to the Rossettis, Dante and Christina, he was raised in the atmosphere of Victorian and pre-Raphaelite art, he published his first book at the age of eighteen.

Ford collaborated with Joseph Conrad on several novels when the Polish born author was unsure of his command of English. But, as the memoir Ford wrote in the year of Conrad's death makes clear, it was the technique of fiction that fascinated the two men. A story should read the way it would sound if told by a good storyteller -- that was their shared theory.. Later Conrad novels have as their distinctive trait the narrative voice of one who, over a bottle, is recalling the events of the story.

This technique called for a progression quite different from the chronological. When you tell your spouse about your day, you constantly

interrupt yourself, recall something that happened earlier than what you were telling, move back and forth, yet somehow drive forward to the point.

The Good Soldier puts this technique to masterful use.

The best art conceals itself, as Horace knew, and the same can be said of artlessness in fiction. Ford's narrator recalls events that have somewhat the effect of Agatha Christie's *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?* at the end of which the narrator is surprisingly revealed to be the murderer. Ford's narrator tells of the way in which he was betrayed, by a friend, by his wife, and Ford manages to invest his narrator at the start of the telling with the same naiveté he had at the start of the events narrated. The motto of the novel is taken from the Beatitudes: *Beati Immaculati* -- blessed are the pure of heart.

If the novel is a *tour de force*, it is only retrospectively that we think so. In the reading we are swept into the account and are not conscious of how the effects are achieved. The view Ford attributes to Conrad was surely his own -- "every work of art has -- must have -- a profound moral purpose." And, describing the sense of achievement Conrad must have felt at the end, all the reverses temporary, the achievements as lasting as mortal man is capable of, Ford concludes, "That is to be granted what we Papists call the cross of the happy death."

The false note here -- 'cross' for 'grace' -- is indicative of Ford's unsureness about the religion to which he was converted at the age of

eighteen. As his latest biographer Alan Judd puts it, "He was received into the Roman Catholic Church later that same year in Paris and remained nominally a Catholic for the rest of his life, though his practice was irregular and his belief at best ambiguous." When his daughter Christina went to school to the nuns, he was nervous, and indeed she became a nun and remained one all her long life.

Ford himself left his first wife, lived notoriously with Stella Bowen and spent the last decade of his life with Janice Biala. He was, in the phrase, susceptible to women, and vice versa. His last mistress, an "unreconstructed Jew," may not be the best source of what Ford's faith consisted of, yet she gives strong testimony of it almost inadvertently. He was not practicing, she wrote, but he preferred Catholicism because it was clear enough so that you could break away from it and know you had. He admired the Church's organization and he had a devotion to Mary. She concludes by saying that Ford believed in Catholicism philosophically.

One might better say, imaginatively. Ford saw in fidelity the main inspiration of Conrad's fiction, fidelity and its opposite. Betrayal and treachery, a person's failure to be or do what he morally must -- these are what excited Ford's imagination. And in *The Good Soldier* he magnificently developed it through the eyes of one betrayed.

Ford was sixty-six when he died, and that is surprising, since he seemed to have lived three or four lives and to have known everyone. In

Portraits from Life, he writes of Henry James, Stephen Crane, W. H. Hudson, Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy, H. G. Wells, John Galsworthy, D. H. Lawrence, Turgenev, Dreiser and Swinburne. He went off to World War I at nearly forty years of age and in the post-War World, in Paris, edited the *transatlantic review* and knew Joyce and Hemingway and Pound. In *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway repays Ford's kindness in the coin of resentment, but then only the author comes out of that book unscathed.

Parade's End, Ford's tetralogy of World War I, is autobiographical in part. In it he puts before us the enormous social and moral upheaval that the war was. These four novels have recently been issued in a convenient single volume by Everyman's Library. They are to English involvement in the first world war, what Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time* and Waugh's *Sword of Honor* are to the second. (Why would it seem so odd to add *The Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance* to that little list?)

Ford also wrote a trilogy about Henry Eighth which bears the collective title *The Fifth Queen*. Here is Ford on the events that produced the great separation of the English church from Rome. That theological differences should be embedded in the lust and pride of men and women does not seem anomalous to him.

Greene compared the aged Ford to an impossibly old veteran of the Napoleonic wars who could tell us of long ago mythical times from his own

experience. Ford wrote a great many reminiscences, aiming not a impersonal factual truth, but at conveying what people and events had meant to him. They have the truth of his impressions.

In this country he was close to Alan Tate and Caroline Gordon and the young Robert Lowell, Catholics all, at the time, but it was Mount Olivet College in Michigan that had the sense to snare this literary treasure and give him a classroom as well as an honorary degree.

When his life ended, he could not have felt the serenity he attributed to Conrad at the end of his. He does not, alas, seem to have been granted the 'cross of a happy death.' "Ford asked for no priest and received no last rites."

God of course moves in mysterious ways, even more mysteriously than the narrative line in a Ford novel. It is pleasant to think of him there in Deauville, in the Clinique St François, cared for by nuns. And there was his daughter Christina too, in her convent, doubtless praying for the talented, generous, weak, loyal, wavering, great hearted man who was her father. His may not have been the saddest story, but like his fiction it had, however fitfully, a strong moral purpose.