

FORD AND PROVENCE¹

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Most Francophiles, beside their general attachment to French customs and culture, have an additional fondness for a region or city which speaks particularly to them: for landscapists it might be Burgundy, for monument-sniffers the Loire, for solitarists and hikers the Massif Central. Those who want to be reminded of a certain kind of England go for the Dordogne, where the *Daily Mail* is readily available. Many simply choose Paris, which might seem to sum everything up, and where – unlike in London – most people still have regional attachments as strong as their metropolitan ones. Ford Madox Ford lived in Paris off and on throughout the 1920s – editing the *transatlantic review*, living with the Australian painter Stella Bowen, having his affair with Jean Rhys, knowing Pound and Joyce and Hemingway and Fitzgerald, having the twenty-three-year-old Basil Bunting as his office boy. He enjoyed a full literary and social life in the (largely non-French) bohemia of Montparnasse. He once went up in a lift with Jean Rhys and James Joyce: despite his poor eyesight, Joyce managed to notice that Rhys's dress was undone at the back, and tried to hook her up.² And yet Ford, who once wrote a book called *New York is Not America*, also knew that Paris is Not France. For him the real France was a region which official 'France' – northern, bureaucratic, centralising – had long ago conquered and attempted to both dismantle and dis-language: Provence.

His passionate attachment to the region came from his father, Francis Hueffer, music critic of the *Times*, who published a book on the Troubadours, and wrote Provençal poetry. Hueffer knew Frédéric Mistral (1830-1914), the poet at the heart of the revival of Provençal, who in 1854 had set up the Félibrige with seven fellow-poets, and an academy to codify the language (the result being the great dictionary known as *Trésor du Félibrige*). According to Ford, his father played chess with Mistral and was received into the Félibrige. According to Ford, the only two things his father taught him were 'a very little Provençal' and rudimentary chess.³ The phrase 'according to Ford' needs tacitly applying to much he wrote of an autobiographical nature

(and there were eight such volumes), since he had a great contempt for fact and a countervailing belief in the 'absolute accuracy' of impressions. Ezra Pound told Hemingway that Ford 'only lied when he was very tired';⁴ but if so, Ford must have been tired a lot of the time. His lies grew perhaps ever more extravagant with time. According to Ford, the great chef Escoffier once said to him, 'I could learn cooking from you', while Henry James came to him, with tears in his eyes, asking for help with a plot.⁵ In *A Mirror to France* (1926), Ford explains how he had attended Dreyfus's second trial at Rennes in 1899, and that 'it was in the changing lights and shadows of that courthouse' that he first 'began to have a sense of the profound cleavage that was to come between opposing schools of French thought' (*MF* 26). In fact, all that time he was busy on the Kentish coast collaborating with Conrad (nor is it remotely plausible that a French military court would have allowed him to be present). Faced with Ford's multitudinous fabrications, his biographer Max Saunders rightly concludes that it is a question of 'asking less whether what Ford says is *true*, and more what it *means*' (Saunders, vol. 2 440).

Ford's love of Provence can, however, be accorded the status of both a major fact and a lifelong impression. For some years he and Stella Bowen would head south by the overnight train from the Gare de Lyon. The rich and fashionable (including Florence Dowell in *The Good Soldier*) would take the famous Train Bleu, a privately run, first-class-only operation, whose passengers might dine beforehand at the restaurant of the same name, high overlooking the tracks: for a long time the ritziest station brasserie in the world. Ford and Bowen would travel second-class on the humbler 9.40. Nowadays the TGV from the Gare de Lyon will get you to Avignon in just over two and a half hours; then the city was reached after ten and a half hours, at about eight in the morning, with the 'urgent muddy Rhone' beside you and the first streaks of light in the sky. But there are advantages to slow travel, to the sense of changing landscape, to dozing off, and waking up, as Bowen put it,

amongst the pale olives, the dark cypresses, the grey rocks and the flat-roofed, flat-faced houses which in spite of their poverty and austerity seem to hold promise of a sweeter life within their dry old walls.⁶

Quite where Provence began was another of Ford's variable facts. Sometimes he said it was at Lyon, at other times Valence or Montelimar. Perhaps it depended on when the train jogged him awake.

The shape of it was always a triangle, with the Rhone wandering down the middle: a narrow one like a slice of Brie if Provence began at Lyon, a fatter, more equilateral one if it began lower down. The Rhone also divided what Ford thought of as the ‘true Provence’ of the east bank – where are found the three A-list cities of Arles, Avignon and Aix, plus Ford’s favourite town of Tarascon – from ‘the sort of quasi-Provence that contains Montpellier, Beziers, Carcassonne and Perpignan’ on the other side (*Provence* 93). This reflects the old division between the *Empire* or east bank and the *Royaume* or west. Thus, according to Ford, the most famous southern writer of the nineteenth century, Alphonse Daudet, ‘was not a true Provençal’, since he came from Nîmes, which ‘with all its charms’ – the Maison Carrée, the bullfights, and ‘one memorable eating place’ – ‘is not true Provence’.⁷

Ford and Bowen were first invited south to stay in the ‘magical’ yet at the same time ‘quite ordinary little villa’ of Harold Monro, founder of the Poetry Bookshop, in the winter of 1922-3 (Saunders, vol. 2 127). Next they tried Tarascon, from where he wrote ‘Life is so relatively cheap in France . . . that I shouldn’t wonder if we settled down here for good. Besides, the French make much of me – which at my age is inspiring.’⁸ After a brief diversion into the wilder Ardèche, the Spanish Cubist Juan Gris and his wife Josette suggested Toulon, then as now a navy town, and therefore cheap. Bowen and Ford were similar, according to Stella, in that each was ‘a rolling stone with domestic instincts and a steady longing for a house, a garden and a view’ (Bowen 142). If they found this anywhere, they did so at Cap Brun outside Toulon, where they spent two winters, and whither Ford returned with Bowen’s successor after they had parted company. In her admirably sane, generous and unFordianly trustworthy memoir, *Drawn from Life*, Bowen analyses the spell Provence cast on them:

It is something to do with the light, I suppose, and the airiness and bareness and frugality of life in the Midi which induces a simplicity of thought, and a kind of whittling to the bone whatever may be the matter in hand. Sunlight reflected from red tiled floors on to whitewashed walls, closed shutters and open windows and an air so soft that you live equally in and out of doors, suggest an experience so sweetly simple that you wonder that life ever appeared the tangled, hustling and distracting piece of nonsense you once thought it. Your mind relaxes, your thoughts spread out and take their shape, phobias disappear, and if passions become quicker, they also lose their power of deadly strangulation. Reason wins. And you are released from the necessity of owning things. There is no need to be cosy. A pot of flowers, a strip of

fabric on the wall, and your room is furnished. Your comforts are the light and warmth provided by nature, and your ornaments are the orange trees outside. (Bowen 147-8)

Life was cheap, and the more so because Ford was an enthusiastic kitchen gardener. He claimed to have studied under the great Professor Gressent in Paris, which is deeply improbable; though he at least read him, learning that ‘Three hoeings are as good as two coats of dung’.⁹ He was also unscientifically superstitious, sowing seed only when the moon was waxing, never planting on a Friday or a 13th, but always on a 9th, an 18th or a 27th. He cultivated those Mediterranean items – aubergines, garlic, peppers – later introduced to the British by Elizabeth David. Bowen attests to Ford’s culinary skills, even if he ‘reduced the kitchen to the completest chaos’ (Bowen 67). He also took to the local wine. The delicate Gris said, ‘He absorbs a terrifying quantity of alcohol. I never thought one could drink so much.’¹⁰ (Ford, who was a great layer-down of the law, assured James Joyce in a letter that ‘le premier devoir du vin est d’être rouge’: the primary responsibility of a wine is to be red.)¹¹ Meanwhile, Bowen discovered a small shop in Toulon selling nothing but different kinds of olive oil, to be tasted from a row of taps on a piece of bread – this at a time when the British were still pouring the stuff not into their mouths but into their waxed-up ears. And Ford liked the way he was treated in France simply for being a writer. Bowen describes the pleasure he felt on receiving a letter which began ‘*Cher et illustre Maître*’ (Bowen 101). According to Ford, when they moved into their house in Toulon, their landlord, a retired naval quartermaster, was so delighted to have a poet for a tenant that he drove a hundred and fifty miles to fetch him a root of asphodel – because asphodels grew on the Elysian Fields, and every poet must have ‘that fabulous herb’ in his garden (*Provence* 228). If only Ford hadn’t specified ‘a hundred and fifty miles’, we might be more inclined to believe him.

‘[T]here are in this world only two earthly Paradises . . . Provence . . . and the Reading Room of the British Museum’ (*Provence* 215). Provence was not only itself, but also the absence of the North, where most human vices accumulated. The North meant aggression, the Gothic, the ‘sadically mad cruelties of the Northern Middle Ages’ and the ‘Northern tortures of ennui and indigestion’ (*Provence* 170). Ford was a great believer in diet and digestion as controllers of human behaviour (Conrad agreed, maintaining that the ‘ill-cooked food’ of Native American Indians caused ‘raging

dyspepsia' and hence their 'unreasonable violence').¹² South good, North bad: Ford was convinced that no-one could be 'completely whole either physically or mentally' without 'a reasonable amount of garlic' in their diet, and equally obsessed with the malign effect of Brussels sprouts, an item of particular Northern mischief. Provence was a place of good thoughts and moral actions 'for there the apple will not flourish and the Brussels sprout will not grow at all'.¹³ The North was also full of excessive meat-eating, which caused not just indigestion but lunacy: 'Any alienist will tell you that the first thing he does with a homicidal maniac after he gets him into an asylum is to deliver, with immense purges, his stomach from bull-beef and Brussels sprouts' (*Provence* 224). Another of Ford's charmingly bonkers theories was about the grapefruit. The English translators of the Bible had been misguided in writing that Eve was tempted by an apple. The word they should have been aiming for was shaddock, another name for the grapefruit. Now, in Provence grapefruit grow abundantly, but are scorned by the inhabitants, who might occasionally use a little of the zest in cooking, but would routinely throw the fruit to the pigs. Since Provençals have never eaten of the grapefruit, therefore they have never fallen, therefore they live in Paradise, QED (*Provence* 79).

But Provence meant far more to Ford than easy living and sound diet; beneath its surface pleasures lay a mythic and historical substructure. Provence was where the Great Trade Route, having run from China across Asia and Asia Minor to Venice and Genoa and along the north shore of the Mediterranean, finally turned north at Marseilles. Then it went:

up the Rhone [. . .] inland, by way of Beaucaire and Lyons to Paris; then down the Seine past Rouen to the English Channel which it crossed at its narrowest and so away along the South Coast of England past Ottery St Mary's to the Scilly Isles where it ended abruptly. . . . (*Provence* 17)

It brought the flow of civilisation with it – or at least, the display goods of civilisation – and, for Ford, 'Provence is the only region on the Great Trade Route fit for the habitation of a proper man' (*Provence* 20). Of all the towns and cities he loved Tarascon 'the best in the world'; it was where Good King René held his court, and where, according to Ford, you couldn't sleep for the noise of the nightingales.¹⁴ King René also had a court at Aix-en-Provence, but Ford didn't like the city – 'birthplace of Cézanne though it be, and

though it be the gravest and most stately eighteenth-century town that you will find anywhere' (*Provence* 258). The problem was that Aix contained the Parlement, the intermediary through which successive French kings ruled: from there 'the lawyers of the Parlement . . . fixed on Provence the gadfly yoke of armies of functionaries that have ever since bled and crippled not Provence alone but all the country of the Lilies' (*Provence* 258).

What does civilisation, as embodied by Provence, consist of? In *A Mirror to France* Ford gave his answer:

[C]hivalric generosity, frugality, pure thought and the arts are the first requisites of a Civilisation – and the only requisites of a Civilisation; and such traces of chivalric generosity, frugality, pure thought and the arts as our prewar, European civilisation of white races could exhibit came to us from the district of Southern France on the shores of the Mediterranean where flourished the Counts of Toulouse, olive trees, the mistral, the Romance Tradition, Bertran de Born, the Courts of Love, and the only really amiable Heresy of which I know. (*MF* 14)

The period covered runs roughly from the twelfth to the fifteenth century. The 'amiable' heresy was Albigensianism, whose piety and virtue (and Manichean doctrine) brought its destruction in a Papal crusade led with immense cruelty by Simon de Montfort in 1209-13. The Troubadours – of whom Bertran de Born (c1140-c1215) was one of the most famous – and their Courts of Love continued up to the end of the thirteenth century, though their influence was much curtailed when Provence west of the Rhone was ceded to Louis XI in 1229. Avignon prospered between 1309 and 1408 as the seat of seven popes and two anti-popes, while Good King René (1408-80) presided over the final efflorescence of Provençal culture, after which the region east of the Rhone was in turn ceded to the French King. This whole period came in later centuries to represent a kind of Merrie France – tournaments, chivalry, and courtly love, with wise rulers overseeing peace and human contentment. According to Ford, the first piece of French literature he read as a schoolboy was a rapturous description by Daudet of life in Avignon under the Popes: processions, pilgrimages, streets strewn with flowers, the sound of bells at all hours, 'the tic-tac of the lace-bobbins, and the rustle of the shuttles weaving the cloth of gold chasubles, the little hammers of the goldsmiths tapping the altar-cruets' and 'the under-sound of tambourines coming from the Bridge':

For, in our country, when the people is glad, there must be dancing, there must be . . . dancing! And since, in those days, the streets of the city were too narrow for the *farandole*, fifes and tambourines kept to the Bridge of Avignon, in the fresh breezes of the Rhone and day and night was dancing; was . . . dancing! Ah, happy days, happy city! The pikes that did not cut; the state prisons where wine lay cooling! . . . Never famine, never wars . . . That was how the Popes of the Comtat knew how to govern their people; that is why their people has so much regretted them! (Quoted in *Provence* 208)

Ford is more idiosyncratic and textured than Daudet in his appreciation of the South. Provence was not just a lost golden land; despite conquest, it was both tenacious and invasive. The extermination of the language had been decreed under Louis XI, François 1er and Louis XIV, but Provençal continued to be spoken for centuries, and was there waiting to be revived and made official once again by the Félibrige. And though France was ‘the first Mass Product in the way of modern nations’ (*Provence* 258), Provence, despite being crushed and subsumed, had the revenge of the defeated: it infiltrated the dominant culture. The virtues and values of Provence spread up through the remnants of the Great Trade Route, so that France was civilised to the extent that she submitted to this reverse takeover. And Provence was not just a region but also a state of mind – indulgent, fantastical, credulous – and this element fed into those harsh and pragmatic owners up in the North.

Ford’s historical and travel writing is vivid, often tendentious, and always personal. His nostalgia becomes blatantly solipsistic, for instance, when he looks at the rewards and public standing of the Troubadour poets. He himself was perpetually impoverished: in 1907 he set what must be some kind of record by publishing six books and also applying to the Royal Literary Fund for financial assistance. How different it was back in the twelfth century:

The Troubadour appears as taking the place of the Hollywood star – but of the Hollywood star who should not be only performer but the extraordinarily skilful author and composer of the piece [. . .] As writer and performer Peire Vidal was the equal of the highest in the land and the terror of noble husbands though but the son of small tradespeople. (*Provence* 185-6)

This was a key feature of Troubadour art for Ford: it was ‘essentially both democratic and aristocratic’ (*Provence* 172). By which he meant that the Troubadours might be of humble origin and yet address their love-songs to aristocratic women. But he also meant that this was how all the arts should be: ‘democratic’ inasmuch as anyone could make

them, and anyone could enjoy them; but made by a process which was 'aristocratic' in the sense of being highly skilled, difficult and rare.

Ford described himself as a 'sentimental Tory' who liked 'pomp, banners, divine rights, unreasonable ceremonies and ceremoniousness' (*RY* 76). He presented himself as a rather old-fashioned English officer and gentleman. His grandfather had 'insisted characteristically that although one must know French with accuracy one must speak it with a marked English accent to show that one is an English gentleman. I still do' (*MF* 113). (But this being Ford, there is a contradictory explanation provided by Stella Bowen: his French sounded English because he never moved his lips enough: Bowen 103.) The honourable, chivalric man, trying to do his best in a modern world which fails to recognize his virtues, is a recurrent figure in Ford's work. And there is a quietly insistent chivalric element underlying his greatest novel, *The Good Soldier*. The two couples at the heart of this story of destructive passion, the Ashburnhams and the Dowells, meet for the first time in the hotel restaurant of a German spa town. They find a table to suit them; it is round; Florence Dowell comments, 'And so the whole round table is begun', quoting Malory.¹⁵ She and her husband have visited Provence, 'where even the saddest stories are gay' (*GS* 17); and Dowell, the narrator, at one point tells, in his prose, non-understanding way, the story of Peire Vidal. The Good Soldier of the title, Edward Ashburnham, is presented as an absolute English gentleman forever on a 'feudal' quest to help others; his ward, Nancy Rufford, who is in love with him, specifically links him to three chivalric figures of different cultures – Lohengrin, the Chevalier Bayard and El Cid (*GS* 111-12). Dowell, who is in love with Nancy, explains himself in the novel's famous, high-Romantic line, 'I just wanted to marry her as some people want to go to Carcassonne' (*GS* 143). And at the end of the book, after the great emotional 'smash' is over, Dowell revisits Provence: 'I have seen again for a glimpse, from a swift train, Beaucaire with the beautiful white tower, Tarascon with the square castle, the great Rhone, the immense stretches of the Crau. I have rushed through all Provence – and all Provence no longer matters' (*GS* 269).

It no longer matters because its high-hearted truths have been shown to be deluded. Ford may have loved Provence and its golden mythology, but he was also a modern novelist, guided by the emotional truthfulness of Flaubert and Maupassant. He knew that 'the saddest stories' nowadays are rarely gay, but just very sad, if not murderously

violent; and that any gaiety around is likely to come from misunderstanding and self-deception. He knew also that the human heart is 'defective'. So, as the novel unfolds, Ashburnham, for all the homoerotic worship Dowell accords him, is revealed to be no Lohengrin but the opposite – or rather, both at the same time; while generous and sentimental, he is also a sex-pest with a conviction for assaulting a girl on a train, a liar, a near-bankrupt, and a squalid blackmail victim. He may even (depending on one's reading of certain powerful hints) have conceived an incestuous passion for his own daughter. Nowadays, he would probably have found himself on the sex register. Ford, for all his convincing self-presentation as a moth-eaten old gent – E. M. Forster snootily called him 'a fly-blown man of letters', Paul Nash 'Silenus in tweeds' – understood the modern world, and the reality that opposed its lingering myths.¹⁶ After all, in 1913, two years before *The Good Soldier* was published, he had visited the totemic city of Carcassonne, towards which Dowell and others feel such a romantic impulsion. And what had Ford discovered there? Snow and rabies.

Ford's Provence was an ideal lost world, a cradle of civilisation, and a reference point in his fiction. But the region contained more than just the past and present; it also suggested a possible future. In *Provence* (1935) Ford at one point asks to be regarded not as a moralist or historian, but 'simply as prophet'. Civilisation is 'staggering to its end' and he wants to show 'what will happen to it if it does not take Provence of the XIII century for its model' (*Provence* 255). Ford had seen service as a transport officer in the first world war, where he was gassed; and he spent his last twenty years (before his death in 1939) watching the grim chest-beating of nations and ideologies across Europe. He loathed empty-headed nationalism, violence, transnational standardisation, mechanisation, and most of the doings of financiers. He was also a writer, and thus a citizen not of any one country but of the world; and he wondered how that world might emerge from the great smash that was coming, and avoid further smashes. How might the human brute be tamed? Not by bigger groupings, by signing up to yet more overarching -ologies, by exterminating languages and individualisms. Perhaps, he thought, we should become local again, live in smaller communities, learn to avoid the hysterical clamourings of gangs and groups. This was the sort of life he imagined – and had found – in Provence. In *Great Trade Route* (1937), he wrote:

I live in Provence, but I can't become a Provençal because that, as things go, would be to become French, and I don't want to become French for reasons that would take too long to tell.

... No, I want to belong to a nation of Small Producers, with some local, but no national feeling at all. Without boundaries, or armed forces, or customs, or government. That would never want me to kill anyone out of a group feeling. Something like being a Provençal. I might want to insult someone from the Gard if he said he could grow better marrows than we in the Var. But that would be as far as even local feeling would go.¹⁷

The old advice about cultivating one's garden was always moral as well as practical; nor was it a counsel of quietism. As human beings recklessly use up the world's resources and despoil the planet, as the follies of globalisation become more apparent, as we head towards what could be the biggest smash of all, the wisdom and the way of living that Ford Madox Ford – literature's good soldier – found in Provence are perhaps even more worth attending to.

NOTES

- 1 An un-annotated version of this essay was first published in the *Guardian*, 21 August 2010, *Review*, 2-4, under the title 'Ford Madox Ford's passionate affair with Provence'.
- 2 Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, 2 vols, Oxford University Press, 1996 – henceforth 'Saunders'; vol. 2, p. 284.
- 3 Ford, *A Mirror to France*, London: Duckworth, 1926 – henceforth *MF*; p. 112.
- 4 Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, London: Cape, 1964, p. 77.
- 5 Herbert Gorman, 'Ford Madox Ford: The Personal Side', *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 9:3 (April 1948), 121-2.
- 6 Stella Bowen, *Drawn from Life*, London: Collins, 1941 – henceforth 'Bowen'; p. 92.
- 7 Ford, *Provence*, Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1935 – henceforth *Provence*; p. 25.
- 8 Ford to Edgar Jepson, 8 May 1923: *Letters of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Richard M. Ludwig, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965 – henceforth *LF*; pp. 149-50.
- 9 Ford, *Return to Yesterday*, London: Gollancz, 1931 – henceforth *RY*; p. 112.
- 10 Quoted in Saunders, vol. 2 290.
- 11 Ford to Joyce, 9 March 1931: *LF* 199.
- 12 Joseph Conrad, Introduction to Jessie Conrad's *A Handbook of Cookery for a Small House*, reprinted as 'Cookery', *Last Essays* (1926) London: Dent, 1972, p. 147.
- 13 Ford to E. S. P. Haynes, 24 January 1939: *LF* 309. *Provence* 78.
- 14 Ford, *It Was the Nightingale*, London: Heinemann, 1934, p. 225.
- 15 Ford, *The Good Soldier*, London: John Lane, 1915 – henceforth *GS*; p. 41.
- 16 Forster to Alice Clara Forster [22 July 1914], *Selected Letters of E. M. Forster*, ed. Mary Lago and P. N. Furbank, London: Collins, 1983, pp. 210-11. Paul Nash, quoted in Saunders, vol. 2 282.
- 17 Ford, *Great Trade Route*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1937, pp. 86-7.