

Ford Madox Ford: Some Do Not...

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Randall Jarrell once defined the novel as an extended work of prose fiction that has something wrong with it.

Parade's End, Ford Madox Ford's four-volume story of the life of the elephantine Christopher Tietjens, is its own elephantine creation, and it certainly has a lot wrong with it.

Though called upon to account only for the opening volume, *Some Do Not*, I persisted through all 870 pages till its end in a West Sussex farmyard because I was worried about what would happen to Christopher and Valentine. And I thought all of you might be too.

I am prepared to tell all—starting with Ford himself.

By all accounts, in life, Ford Madox Ford was a liar, a confabulator. For instance in one of his books of reminiscences, he recalls, as a child, hearing Carlyle describe how once in Weimar he grabbed a waiter's apron and served tea to Goethe and Schiller. Alas that Carlyle never traveled to Weimar and he was a five-year-old still in skirts when Schiller died. And tea to Germans? Let me ask: Was that not a good story and would you not have liked for it to be true? I would.

All this has made me wonder if Ford's tendency to prevaricate is not implicated in what is wrong with *Parade's End*. For, if Ford is unreliable in what he says, he is downright sloppy in what he writes. In *Some Do Not*, for example, his son's name is Tommy; in the final volume, *Last Post*, Tommy has become Michael to his mother, Mark to his father. The beautiful Sylvia's hair is pre-Raphaelite red in the first book, blond in the second book and "auburn" at the end. Mrs. Wannop is in her 40s in the first book; two fictional years later, she is in her 60s. Valentine's nose is pug one day, pointed the next. These are details that most editors would not have allowed.

Other inconsistencies are more troublesome. By the close of *Some Do Not*, Tietjens, the data man, has proved statistically that Sylvia's baby is his, and

he has refuted most of Sylvia's lies: namely, her husband is not a socialist, Valentine is not his half sister, Valentine has not born his child out of wedlock, he does not use his wife's money to keep his mistresses, and his father did not kill himself in grief over his son's behavior. Nevertheless, these lies continue to haunt the succeeding novels.

Has Ford compromised his art? Probably. But Ford was scrambling poor, he needed money, and for only the second time in his life, he had captured the attention of a devoted public.

In my thinking, Ford's narrative inconsistencies are outweighed by the bounty of those truths that are fundamental to the human experience: what Faulkner called "the human heart in conflict with itself." They inhere in every page of *Parade's End*. Ford's brilliance arises not from his wobbly plot but from the characters that walk on that stage. Each of them is a masterful authorial achievement. All of them are at war with themselves.

Sylvia, a pre-Raphaelite beauty, has just returned from Germany, where she has been cohabiting unsatisfactorily with a man named Perowne. In a succeeding novel, Perowne is sent to France where he dies peacefully in the comfort and care of Captain Christopher Tietjens. Sylvia loves and hates her husband: She loves him because he is the most honorable man she has ever known, and she hates him because he cannot love her and will not hate her. Exquisitely efficient in her revenge, she succeeds, directly or indirectly, in alienating Christopher within his own high-born gentrified culture, disgracing him before his colleagues, denouncing him at his bank, embarrassing him at his club, alienating him from his brother and maneuvering his transfer from a safe government office into the trenches of World War I. As a final blow, she engineers the lease of Groby Hall, the ancestral home of the Tietjens family, to an American, who speedily cuts down the centuries-old Great Groby tree. Sylvia is a pitiless woman.

In truth, it would be near impossible to rip out the stout heart of Christopher Tietjens: Like his namesake, he bears his burden silently and doggedly, imperturbable in the face of Sylvia's onslaughts and unmoved by the praise or the condemnation of any person on earth. He is a self-confident upper level statistician, which is fine work for a formidable brain. A bit stiff in the manner of brilliant men, he longs for the life of an English country gentleman, and, if he could, he would live that life in the 17th

century. He is thoroughly English, a Cambridge man, the last Tory; no one would dare call him “British”: his homeland is tea and a bit of sherry, green fields, sheep grazing through the town center, hedge rows and stone walls, even the early nights and the day-long fog draping the towns and cities out to sea. Christopher Tietjens is as insular as the island he loves.

He carries his pridefulness, his carefully crafted manners, his resolute Anglicanism with him wherever he goes. In truth, you might say—well, since there are ladies here—you might just say, “the impeccable Christopher Tietjens is at risk of being thought an insufferable prig!”

And so his decline into love is a giant step forward into the emotional ranks of ordinary humans, and we are happy for him.

He has found a “girl,” Valentine Wannop, also named for a saint, but not a saint. Better than a saint, she is a suffragist and an anti-war protestor accosting him and his pals on a golf course, chased by police and gallantly protected by him. Unpredictably, the venerable Tory falls in love with the spirited Valentine Wannop.

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In England, what does a man do with his mistress? According to Tietjens’s brother Mark, first, be sure she knows how to cook a mutton chop; second, set her up in, say, a tobacco shop; third, be sure she creates a fictitious first name, so that if he decides to marry her, she will not be recognized as his former mistress.

But Christopher Tietjens is not that kind of lover, and Valentine is not that kind of “girl.” She lives with and supports her widowed mother, a novelist. She is well educated, and though the Wannop family name is an ancient one, she and her mother live in poverty. Valentine has worked as a house maid and now as a gym teacher. She is gutsy and fearless, vigorous and energetic, dedicated to peace and women’s suffrage; her rival, as we know, dedicates herself to the task of destroying and disgracing her estranged husband. Christopher and Valentine spend the war years silently circling one another like Paolo and Francesca, yearning to see, touch, feel. That day comes at the close of book three when they meet on Armistice Day, November 1918, in Tietjens’s tumble-down London flat. Following a wildly happy reunion with his army chums, Valentine and Christopher consummate their love in Tietjens’s flat, which must have been a challenge

because London is cold in November, and the ever-resourceful Sylvia has stolen all his furniture.

Parade's End is difficult to read. It tumbles awkwardly from page to page, circling through the minds of its protagonists, zigzagging without warning from time past to time present. In *Some Do Not*, for example, why is Tietjens, now home from the front, desperately reading through the *Encyclopedia Britannica*? Why is he struggling to remember Metternich's name? Sylvia thinks her husband is dissembling in an effort to avoid combat. Slowly, we learn Tietjens has been wounded and hospitalized, and the following volume describes the explosion that has left him shellshocked. History in Ford's pen does not inscribe a straight path. The "awkwardness" is cultivated. He is keeping company with other major between-the-wars Modernist writers: James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and T.S. Eliot, for example.*

Modernism may also account for the somewhat inconclusive endings in all four novels. In the closing of *Some Do Not*, Tietjens offers Valentine a clunky, business-like and, in my opinion, downright stultifying proposal to "be my mistress." Valentine thought otherwise; however, their union was not yet to be, and the novel closes with Tietjens drearily taking a lorry to Holborn on his way back to the front.

Graham Greene writes that the final novel, *Last Post*, ends idyllically in the brilliant sunshine of a West Sussex farmyard, where Valentine awaits the birth of their first child. That would have been a Dickensian closing. Though Ford certainly felt the tension of turning his back on the great Victorians, he had gone too far to succumb to the allure of a happy ending. Instead, Ford he finds himself standing proudly beside the first great Modernist, Henry James.

In truth. *Parade's End* ends woefully with the indefatigable Sylvia prowling the premises, Mark dying in an outdoor shed, Valentine worrying whether they will ever have enough money to live, and Tietjens, now an antique furniture refinisher and merchant, standing forlorn in a doorway holding a

block of wood, presumably a remnant of the ancient, newly destroyed Great Groby tree.

Today, the names of Christopher, Valentine, Mark, Sylvia—the entire “insubstantial pageant”—will light up few young faces. Indeed, Ford himself belongs less to readers than to scholars, who find his name, in the diaries, memorabilia, and biographies of Conrad, D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, Hemingway, Wyndham Lewis, the magnificent generation of writers he cultivated and inspired. The lead the parade, but Ford is there too, only at the parade's end.

*Eliot's disillusionment and sense of dislocation in the Wasteland seemed to me to hang heavily over Ford's *Lo Ford Madox Ford's Some Do Not*

1. Graham Greene calls Sylvia Tietjens the “most possessed evil character” in 20th century fiction. Why is she so drawn to Christopher Tietjens, whom she calls an ox, a hog, a mad bullock, a dejected bulldog? Do you find Tietjens lovable? Also a bit infuriating? Does Sylvia have any redeeming features?

2. Ford, a veteran, called WWI a “nightmare of pure suffering.” *Some Do Not* was published in 1924, six years after the close of the war. Do you detect a kind of weariness or sense of dispossession in the narrative? When Ford turns generals like Campion and leading bankers like Port Scatho into gullible fools, or when he rewards McMaster with a knighthood for falsifying government statistics, is he disparaging the men who masterminded and waged the war? Even the war itself?

3. In the *Parade's End* tetralogy, Ford creates portraits of three remarkable women: Sylvia Tietjens, Edith Ethel Duchemin McMaster, and Valentine Wannop. One is vicious, one is an insufferable snob, and the third is the best of all womankind. Are these women successful portrayals or are they pantomime versions of womankind? In other words, has Ford failed or succeeded in these portrayals?

4. Ford often seems to put Post-WWI culture on trial. Is there a ruinous code of gentlemanly behavior, for instance? What is the role of gossip or class consciousness? Or sexual mores? How do they propel the drama?

5. Ford is one of the great English ironists. I found much of *Some Do Not* genuinely humorous: the scene with the insane scatological parson, for instance, or the disastrous road wreck that sparks Christopher's and Valentine's love for one another. Do you find humor works well in the novel?

ndon, as well.