

Private Manning & Private Bourne: *Her Privates We*

A discussion of *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, also known as *Her Privates We*, by Frederic Manning, first published by Peter Davies, London, in 1929 (*Middle Parts*) and 1930 (*Privates*), with the author identified as 'Private 19022'.

It took Europe ten years to digest the experiences of World War 1 before it was ready to revisit them in literature. Many fine and famous books appeared in the years following 1929, and one of the finest is Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, better known in its expurgated version, *Her Privates We*. Manning, as we shall see, was a most unlikely soldier, being a fastidious and reclusive scholar, but his knowledge of the writings, the thinking and traditions of European learning, gave him the basis for his treatment of that same civilisation at war. Many commentators have remarked upon the proximity of London, Berlin and Paris, the great centres of European life, to the battlefields of northern France. Men on leave could be at the theatre in London, for instance, one night, and back in the trenches, sloshing through mud and cowering under machine gun fire, a day or two later. People in the south of England could hear the artillery on the other side of The Channel (La Manche). Civilisation's disgrace, its downfall, was obvious, because close, to all. For a brief period in 1916 Frederic Manning was at the heart of the conflict, fighting on the Somme and Ancre fronts in France; then he returned to London and managed to keep away from battlefields until his fellow-soldier Peter Davies persuaded him to put down

what he'd experienced. Manning wrote, Davies took the pages to a typesetter, and brought them back for proofing. When the book was published a few people recognised the identity of the author but it was typical of Manning's unwillingness to have attention drawn to himself that until 1943 his authorship was attributed to 'Private 19022'.

Private 19022. Manning's subject was a civilisation at war with itself, and his individuality was of little importance. His central character, based on himself, is called Private Bourne, the name deriving from a small Lincolnshire market town close to the village of Edenham, where Manning lived, from 1903, with his tutor and mentor, Arthur Galton. In Edenham, Manning wrote, read, considered, and sometimes drank, an inactive life which can be seen as a preparation for something vast and well-nigh inexplicable. It is possible to see, I think, his experience of English rural life as having shaped his way of seeing the world.

There are in reality only two religions on this little planet, and they perhaps begin and end with man. They are: the religion of the humble folk, whose life is a daily communion with natural forces, and a bending to them; and the religion of men like Protagoras, Lucretius, and Montaigne, a religion of doubt, of tolerance, of agnosticism. Between these two poles lies nothing but a dreary waste of formalism.

In Edenham, in Bourne, the two religions lay side by side, Manning embodying the writings, the thoughts, of the thinkers,

while the people around him, continuing the traditions of rural England, were the humble folk. Both were in communion with natural forces, and bent before them as trees and grasses do before a wind. Private Bourne, like Manning himself, was urged to become an officer, but he – both of them – felt more at home in the ranks. After many readings of Manning’s book, in both its versions, I have a feeling that the private soldiers, the common men, did more thinking about the war and why they were fighting it than their officers, and far more than the people back home, whom they were said to be representing. Here’s a soldier called Maddeley, one of Bourne’s companions:

“But it’s all true what ‘e says about folks at ‘ome, most on ‘em. They don’t care a rap what ‘appens to us’ns, so long as they can keep a ‘ole skin. Say they be ready to make any sacrifice; but we’re the bloody sacrifice. You never seed such a windy lot; an’ bloodthirsty ain’t the word for it. They’ve all gone potty. You’d think your best friends wouldn’t be satisfied till they’d seed your name on the roll of honour. I tol’ one of ‘em ‘e knew a bloody sight more’n I did about the war.”

It is quite possible, I think, that people back home may have known more about the war, in some senses, than those at the front, but the one thing they could not know was the effect on the common man of dealing out death and being on the receiving end of it too. Weeper Smart is by far the most miserable, and perhaps the most eloquent, of the voices recorded in Manning’s book:

“Didst ‘ear what Cap’n Thomson read out this mornin’, about stoppin’ to ‘elp any poor bugger what was wounded?”

The bloody brass-‘at what wrote that letter ‘as never been in any big show ‘isself, that a dare swear. ‘e’s one o’ them buggers as is never nearer to the real thing than G.H.Q.”

“You don’t want to talk like that,” said Corporal Hamley. “You’ve ‘ad your orders.”

“A don’t mind tellin’ thee, corporal,” said Weeper, again lifting a large flat hand, as though by that gesture he stopped the mouths of all the world. “A don’t mind tellin’ thee, that if a see a chum of mine down, and a can do aught to ‘elp ‘im, all the brass-‘ats in the British Army, an’ there’s a bloody sight too many o’ ‘em, aren’t going to stop me. A’ll do what’s right, an’ if a know aught about thee, tha’t do as I do.”

When Bourne, Private Bourne, is hit by a bullet at the very end of the book, it’s Weeper who carries him back to their trench.

‘A’ll not leave thee,’ said Weeper.

He stooped and carried the other in his huge, ungainly arms, carrying him as tenderly as though he were a child. Bourne struggled wearily to speak, and the blood, filling his mouth, prevented him. Sometimes his head fell on Weeper’s shoulder. At last, barely articulate, a few words came.

‘I’m finished. Le’ me in peace, for God’s sake. You can’t ...’

‘A’ll not leave thee,’ said Weeper in an infuriate rage.

A line or two later, Bourne is dead, Weeper is raving, and Sergeant Major Tozer is telling him to get himself some hot tea and rum, then come back for a talk when he’s feeling better. An officer says the party had better move on, they do, and Sergeant Major Tozer is left with the dead man. ‘It was finished. He was

sorry about Bourne, he thought, more sorry than he could say. He was a queer chap, he said to himself, as he felt for the dug-out steps. There was a bit of a mystery about him; but then, when you come to think of it, there's a bit of a mystery about all of us.'

Dealing as I have with a soldier's death may give the impression that the book is all about fighting, but a closer examination will reveal that most of the fighting takes place at the beginning and the end, leaving the bulk of the book to description of soldiers close to the front, preparing for the front, thinking and talking about the front, but also thinking about their families back home – on the other side of that strip of water separating England from France. Manning makes it clear that the soldiers are aware that the men in the trenches facing them, the Germans, as intent on killing as they are, are hardly different from themselves. They too get parcels of food, with socks and gloves knitted by their wives and mothers, and they too will go to any lengths to get a bottle of whisky, or rum, to make the unbearable bearable for an hour. Manning is clear, and detailed, in laying out the interweaving webs of regulation that control almost every aspect of the soldiers' lives. Brutal as they may be when they leap out of their trenches to charge their opposites, they are, for the most part, almost as controlled by the minutiae of class and rank as they would be at home. Manning's subject is not so much death and destruction and the brutality it entails, as the nature, the performance, of a civilisation making war.

Making war on itself, because, as stated a moment ago, the Germans are as civilised as those on Private Bourne's side of the

line. It was commonly said, in the countries participating in the war - but said back home, and far from the front - that this was the war to end wars. When it ended, there would be no more. Manning knows this is nonsense, and knew it at the time. Every chapter of his book is headed by a quotation from Shakespeare, usually a snippet from the mouth of one of the dramatist's common soldiers, those who, like Weeper, like Bourne, know exactly how things are, and the effect of these lines at the head of each chapter is to remind us that civilisation is always wageing war on itself or on other civilisations, it's one of the regular expressions, or needs, of a civilisation, and there is therefore nothing new in what is being presented.

Nothing new? Why write it then? It is commonly said of *The Middle Parts of Fortune* that it is not an anti-war book, and, such is the condition of modern thought, this is normally taken to be a criticism or at least a qualification that needs to be kept in mind. Manning would have had none of this. Here are a few lines from his prefatory note of 1929:

War is waged by men; not by beasts, or by gods. It is a peculiarly human activity. To call it a crime against mankind is to miss at least half its significance; it is also the punishment of a crime. That raises a moral question, the kind of problem with which the present age is disinclined to deal. Perhaps some future attempt to provide a solution for it may prove to be even more astonishing than the last.

What does he mean? I've never been sure. The first two sentences are telling enough, but I could not articulate for you, if asked, the moral question he has in mind. Perhaps the age I

live in, like the period when Manning was writing, is disinclined to deal with this question. Why is it not specified? Did Manning feel that his book had said all he could say and that readers must continue the book's thinking if they felt it had any further to go? I have always felt the book to be peculiarly challenging, because it seems to invite the reader to look on its actions from the vantage point of the gods he refers to, while at one and the same time giving not the slightest suggestion that such gods, or even their vantage point in the clouds, actually exist. In other words, we may have a favored position while we read, and consider what we're reading, but once the book has been put down and we become citizens in the street again, humans wishing to act, to influence the way the world performs, we will be as helpless, as limited, as the soldiers in the book, who talk, sleep, drink, and think, but are quite unable to break the bonds of their discipline, quite unable to disobey the command to leap out of their trenches and attack.

There is a soldier called Miller who appears occasionally: a deserter. He's taken around to be shown to the soldiers who haven't given up on fighting, much as they may fear it. Most of the soldiers think Miller should be shot, but Manning makes it clear that few of them would choose to be part of the firing squad. He's a problem they wish would go away. Conveniently, he does just that, getting himself out of custody by some means, and disappearing. Miller's cowardice, if that's what it is, is only peripheral to Manning's thinking. In a whole army, only a handful can take Miller's way out; while all the rest, the sorts of men that talk all around Private Bourne, have to face the consequences of the

decisions that are made for them, higher in the chain of command, and far away from their endless, intermittent considerations. The soldiers are always talking, always speculating, because they have been placed in the line, literally, the line between life and death, and they can find no relief from their situation at all. Unless ...

They all laughed, and Bourne looked at their sneering faces, and turned away again. He wanted to get out of all this senseless clamour; and as his eyes turned away, he chanced to see over the door a red strip on which was printed in white letters: 'AND UNDERNEATH ARE THE EVERLASTING ARMS'. It struck him with an extraordinary vividness, that bare text sprawling across the wall above the clamour of those excited voices; and once again he knew that feeling of certitude in a peace so profound that all the turmoil of the earth was lost in it.

This peace has come to Private Bourne at least once before in the book. There is a lengthy passage at the end of Chapter XI, beginning with the announcement that Bourne's battalion is to march to St. Pol and entrain for the front.

It was very curious to see how the news affected them; friends grouped themselves together, and talked of it from their individual points of view, but the extraordinary thing was the common impulse moving among them, which gathered in strength until any individual reluctances and anxieties were swept away by it. A kind of enthusiasm, quiet and restrained because aware of all it hazarded, swept over them like fire or flood. Even those who feared made the pretence of bravery, the mere act of mimicry opened the way for the contagion, and another will was substituted

for their own, so that ultimately they gave themselves to it. They might fail or break, they might shrink back at the last in an agony of fear, but this overpowering impulse for the time being swept them on towards its own indeterminate ends, as one common impulse might move in a swarm of angry bees.

The men fall in, they march, day turns to night and they are still marching. They rest, they sing as they go forward again:

As they marched through one little village, at about ten o'clock, doors suddenly opened and light fell through the doorways, and voices asked them where they were going.

"Somme! Somme!" they shouted, as if it were a challenge.

"Ah, no bon!" came the kindly pitying voices in reply; and even after the doors had closed again, and they had left that village behind, the kindly voices seemed to drift across the darkness, like the voices of ghosts: "Somme! Ah, no bon!"

And that was an enemy to them, that little touch of gentleness and kindness; it struck them with a hand harsher than death's, and they sang louder, seeing only the white road before them, and the vague shadows of the trees on either hand. At last the singing died away; there was nothing but the trampling of myriad feet; or they would halt for ten minutes, and the darkness along the roadside became alive as with fireflies from the glow of cigarettes through a low mist.

When they reach St. Pol they sing another song mocking their military endeavours, but, because their parody is set to the tune of the Marseillaise, the townspeople push up windows and join in.

This amuses the soldiers, they roar with laughter, they are ordered to march in silence. They find their camp, huts are allotted, and the men are allowed to break ranks:

They laid themselves down, as they were to get a few hours' sleep; and Bourne, dropping off between the two of them, wondered what was the spiritual thing in them which lived, and seemed even to grow stronger, in the midst of beastliness.

But Manning has more ways of invoking his subject than insisting on the spirituality of his comrades. He devotes a couple of pages to the elaborate rehearsal of an attack, the whole brigade marching several miles to a spot where, under the eyes of 'several magnificent people on horseback, glancing superciliously at the less fortunate members of their species', they go through the motions which, a day or two later, they will try to replicate under infinitely more difficult conditions. Things proceed smoothly, if tediously, until A Company, under Mr Sothern, begins to cross a square patch of sown clover, and it is then that the door opens in a small hovel and an infuriated peasant woman appears. The fields, she says, are hers; and she has a withering blast of invective for everyone in sight. 'The soldiers, with a thoroughly English respect for the rights of property, hesitated to commit any further trespass.'

"Send someone to speak to that woman," said the Divisional General to a Brigadier; and the Brigadier passed on the order to the Colonel, and the Colonel to the Adjutant, and the Adjutant to Mr Sothern, who, remembering that Bourne had once interpreted his wishes to an old woman in Meaulte

when he wanted a broom, now thrust him into the forefront of the battle. That is what is called, in the British Army, the chain of responsibility, which means that all responsibility, for the errors of their superior officers, is borne eventually by private soldiers in the ranks.

Bourne negotiates with the aggrieved, and desperately poor, French woman, and at his suggestion the soldiers are allowed to break their lines, to move around the patch of grass which is all she has for her cows to eat in the coming winter, and re-form on the other side. The high-ranking officers move elsewhere, on horseback of course, while this detour is made, but one of the soldiers shouts something about the Germans – ‘les Allemands’- to the angry woman:

“Les Allemands sont tres bons!” she shrieked at him.

An aeroplane suddenly appeared in the sky, and circling over them, signalled with a klaxon horn. The men moved slowly away from her beloved fields, and the tired woman went back into the hovel, and slammed the door on a monstrous world.

The Middle Parts of Fortune is a magnificently democratic book, and I think this is one of the reasons why its Australian admirers, myself included, like to claim it as our own. There is a paradox here! Australia’s soldiers have won their reputation, for the most part, in fighting initiated by other countries – England, and now America. The Australian military tradition can therefore be seen, in part, as a tradition of subservience, of willingness to answer the demands of greater powers than ourselves. According to

this line of argument, the presence of Australian soldiers at some engagement of greater forces is evidence of colonial dependence. True! Yet it is in such circumstances that Australians – the general public back home, at least as much as the soldiers – have felt their difference, have wanted to say that they – we – are something new, something not yet seen by the old world whose orders we obey but of which we are not entirely a part.

Private Manning was an Australian in the British army, and his book contains a number of moments, glancing observations, for they are no more, in which we can see his recognition of the Australian viewpoint that I am talking about. The paradox is, though, that Manning’s consideration of the war in which he finds himself, leads him to see it, as I have been trying to argue, as an almost inevitable behaviour of the civilisation which he knows so well through his reading of its philosophy and literature. It’s no surprise to Manning that Europe is at war; one feels that his presence at the front line – for he was a gifted escaper from anything he didn’t want to be part of – is because of an absorbing curiosity to know what war – this inescapable aspect of the civilisation in which he was so well-read – was actually like. He enlisted, he had a few months at the front, among men who aroused his curiosity, and he got himself out of the line, into officer training at last, and thence to Ireland, far from the bullets and bayonets of the line.

And, indolent as he was, he waited years and then had to be pushed into writing. Out it came, easily, and almost without revision. It’s hard to know whether Manning was most integrated,

most Australian and most European, when he was at the front, or when he was in Peter Davies' apartment, writing. Possibly both. Who can say? All we can do, today, is turn the pages of his book and overhear the thoughts of someone who is at one and the same time expressing the objectivity of an experienced civilisation which knows itself only too well, and offering a contribution to a new formulation, that of a colony beginning to realise that it has a reality all its own.

This would seem to be an end-point, but I want to say a little more. Manning was a man both in the world and not quite of it. He was born into an Irish Catholic family in Sydney, and he suffered from an early age from bronchial asthma. He was devoted to his mother and she to him. She felt that he was not healthy, or strong, enough to go to school, so his education, such as it was, was managed by private tutors, one of whom, coming to him when he was aged thirteen, was the Private Secretary of the Governor of New South Wales, the Arthur Galton mentioned earlier in this piece. Galton, as secretary to the Governor, knew Frederic's parents because William Manning, later Sir William, was elected Lord Mayor of Sydney for four terms, beginning in 1891. So the young Frederic's world was one of privilege and influence, but he was not an active part of it. He was a largely self-directed scholar, even when young, and his illnesses, and no doubt his temperament too, caused those around him to place few expectations of worldly achievement on him. By position, he was something special; by inclination ... it was hard to say what he might be, or do.

Manning's parents enrolled him at Sydney Grammar School for a term or so, but the illness which, one cannot help but feel, was psychosomatically controlled by the boy who appeared to suffer from it, kept him away for most of the time. What to do with Fred? His parents decided that he would, or could, travel to England, continue his studies under the guidance of Galton, who was back in England by then, and prepare himself for Oxford. Still not sixteen, he set sail from Sydney, to be collected, a couple of years later by Sir William and Lady Manning, and brought ... home, if that is the right word for a city about which he knew very little. He and his family had lived in some of the finest buildings in colonial Sydney, but life in the poorer and often squalid areas surrounding them was a mystery which Frederic was never to penetrate. He stayed about three years in the city which was nominally his, then returned to the mentorship of Arthur Galton. Galton took up a position as vicar of a country parish, and the two of them moved to Edenham. From there, Frederic, despite his diffidence and almost pathological inability to present himself to the world as anything but a mind of considerable delicacy and percipience, built, ever so slowly, a tiny group of friends and confidantes, usually women, in the capital.

When war came, however, and he decided to enlist, it was in the King's Shropshire Regiment, where he ate, trained and slept alongside miners and farm labourers with whom one might expect him to have nothing in common. But he seems to have found, in this condition of being unsheltered for the first time in his life, that his curiosity about his fellow soldiers – or soldier-

trainees, for none of them could have had much idea of what they were going to be thrown into – connected him to them. He could sleep on a palliasse of straw, he could smoke, and think, and talk with anyone near him, and they, these strangers who were not strangers to Frederic because they shared the humanity that was common to all who were caught up in the war, found his thoughts, his ability to think and express what he had in mind, made him one with them. The Middle Parts of Fortune makes abundantly clear how closely he listened to the voices around him. His family's wealth, and position, back in Sydney, meant nothing to the men of Shropshire and I feel certain they would never have known Private Manning's background. He, for his part, would, I think, have been glad to be free of it. One can imagine him in the army as a sort of cell of knowledge, of perception, drifting through and among all the other cells, detached from whatever their backgrounds had been, to be merged in the strange, and huge, formation known as the British Army.

Reading his book about the life of soldiering, one comes across passages where it is clear that the discipline of a soldier's life brings into focus certain things which are partly disguised by the daily, civilian and social life of peace. Late in the book, in the chapter before he dies, Private Bourne, or is it Private Manning, has these thoughts:

Whether it were justified or not, however, the sense of being at the disposal of some inscrutable power, using them for its own ends, and utterly indifferent to them as individuals, was perhaps the most tragic element in the men's present situation. It was not much use telling them that war was

only the ultimate problem of all human life stated barely, and pressing for an immediate solution.

Much earlier, Manning offers this:

Bourne looked at his newspaper, in the hope of learning something about the war, but apart from a few colourless details from the French front there was nothing; no one knew anything about it; it was like one of the blind forces of nature; one could not control it, one could not comprehend it, and one could not predict its course from hour to hour.

It is time, I think, to draw together some of Manning's thoughts. Let us start with 'the ultimate problem of all human life'. Manning again:

The problem which confronted them all equally, though some were unable or unwilling to define it, did not concern death so much as the affirmation of their own will in the face of death; and once the nature of the problem was clearly stated, they realised that its solution was continuous, and could never be final.

A few years earlier, in a book called Scenes and Portraits, he put it a little differently:

Take, for example, the curious paradox of Epicureanism, which counsels a temperate pleasure, and yet condemns the whole of life as being merely the pursuit of an unattainable desire, reconciling us to life by the prospect of death, and to death by showing us the vain efforts and innumerable vexations of life.

Readers preoccupied with the pangs of growing up, of love or family life, may think it a luxury to worry about reconciling life and death, but the matter was immediate enough for the men fighting beside Private Bourne and Private Manning.

These apparently rude and brutal natures comforted, encouraged and reconciled each other to fate, with a tenderness and tact which was more moving than anything in life. They had nothing; not even their bodies, which had become mere implements of warfare. They turned from the wreckage and misery of life to an empty heaven, and from an empty heaven to the silence of their own hearts. They had been brought to the last extremity of hope, and yet they put their hands on each other's shoulders and said with a passionate conviction that it would be all right, though they had faith in nothing, but in themselves and each other.

Who would not want to claim the man who could write, and think, like that as one of our own?