

## A master of prose because he knows he shares it

A second look at *The Middle Parts of Fortune (Her Privates We)*, concentrating on what Frederic Manning brought to the art of writing.

Let's see how Frederic Manning starts his book. His battalion – Bourne's battalion – has been in an attack. He gives us a few words from Shakespeare, which we'll come back to, then he begins:

The darkness was increasing rapidly, as the whole sky had clouded, and threatened thunder. There was still some desultory shelling. When the relief had taken over from them, they set off to return to their original line as best they could. Bourne, who was beaten to the wide, gradually dropped behind ...

He blunders into a dug-out, lights a candle, and discovers a water bottle. He's thirsty, so he gulps a drink, but it's whisky. He spits, and then he gulps some more. Three Scotsmen come in, he hides the whisky, then Mr Clinton enters the dug-out. The officer advises the Scots on how to find their battalion, and they leave. Bourne is for going too, but Clinton says 'It's indecent to follow a kilted Highlander too closely out of a dug-out. Besides I left something here.'

He means the whisky. He drinks and Bourne has some more. We're three pages in at this stage, and the tone, the *voice* of the book has been set. It's measured, reflective, and doesn't hurry

around detail. The opening section takes five pages. We've already glanced at Manning's prose, his style; it's a book that's full of voices. He tells us in an 'Author's Prefatory Note' that 'in recording the conversations of the men I seemed to hear the voices of ghosts'. He tells us also that the characters are fictitious, but nobody who's read the book would think this strictly true. So what did he mean? I think he meant that he turned real people into characters for his fiction and – he would be too modest to say this, so I'll say it for him – he lifted his men, and their words, onto a plane that resembles reality but isn't the same: it's mysteriously altered because it's been brought into the realm where things have to be heard, examined, in the imagination before they are brought back into literary or historical understanding. Things must be transformed in order to be understood.

This is not new knowledge. Here's the Shakespearian quote at the top of Chapter 1:

*'By my troth, I care not; a man can die but once; we owe God a death ... and let it go which way it will, he that dies this year is quit for the next.'*

One hundred and fifty pages later, with the men knowing they will soon be sent forward again, and trying to make sense of the hell they find themselves in, a soldier called Pacey says this:

'If they don't send us over the top here, they'll send us over somewhere else. It 'as got to be, an' if it 'as got to be, the

sooner it's over an' done wi' the better. If we die, we die, an' it won't trouble nobody, leastways not for long it won't; an' if we don't die now, we'd 'ave to die some other time.'

It will not escape the reader's notice that Pacey is saying what the greatest of English writers said centuries before. Manning's respect for his soldiers' thoughts is profound. He includes what they say in a way that compels us to respect them. The remnants of Bourne's battalion are brought back to their tents to be dismissed, and a man observing them smacking their rifles and their officer returning their salute 'took his pipe out of his mouth and spat on the ground.'

'They can say what they bloody well like,' he said appreciatively, 'but we're a fuckin' fine mob.'

Two pages earlier, over those gulps of whisky, Mr Clinton told Bourne that the two of them are lucky because they've come through without a scratch, and if their luck holds they'll 'move out of one bloody misery into another, until we break, see, until we break.' Manning is both outlining the men's situation, and stating his themes. Themes, as surely we know, can only be developed if a writer can make his prose rise to their demands; let us now move to Chapter 16, two hundred pages later. The previous chapter has ended with the men being ordered to fall in on the road; they do so, and a few moments later they are marching towards the attack that will end the book and Bourne's life. Manning writes this falling-in and marching quite marvellously, but he has plenty in reserve for the start of the following chapter. He quotes Shakespeare again – and again I'll come back to it – and then he gives us:

The drumming of the guns continued, with bursts of great intensity. It was as though a gale streamed overhead, piling up great waves of sound, and hurrying them onward to crash in surf on the enemy entrenchments. The windless air about them, by its very stillness, made that unearthly music more terrible to hear. They cowered under it, as men seeking shelter from a storm. Something rushed down on them with a scream of exultation, increasing to a roar before it blasted the air asunder and sent splinters of steel shrieking over their heads, an eruption of mud spattering down on the trench, and splashing in brimming shell-holes. The pressure among the men increased. Someone shouldering a way through caused them to surge together, cursing, as they were thrown off their balance to stumble against their neighbours.

'For Christ's sake walk on your own fuckin' feet an' not on mine!' came from some angry man, and a ripple of idiot mirth spread outwards from the centre of the disturbance. Bourne got a drink of tea, and though it was no more than warm, it did him good; at least, it washed away the gummy dryness of his mouth. He was shivering, and told himself it was the cold.

Manning moves on to discuss fear; they're all afraid because it's impossible to be otherwise. Some rum is brought around, and they drink it. 'It'll soon be over now,' Martlow says, one of the two young men the educated Bourne has befriended. Manning also talks about comradeship, which extends to anybody in the same wretched position. Friendships, which form often enough, are forever being broken as men are killed or so harshly wounded that they're sent out of the battle. Fate can't be controlled, and

Headquarters' plans are usually beyond the men, so they are left with each other:

Only there was a sound of movement, a sudden alertness thrilled through them all with an anguish inextricably mingled with relief. They shook hands, the three among themselves and then with others near them.

Good luck, chum. Good luck. Good luck.

He felt his heart thumping at first. And then, almost surprised at the lack of effort which it needed, he moved towards the ladder.

The attack that follows is confused. The artillery barrage supporting the men, and clearing their way through enemy resistance, moves faster than the men, who are slipping and sliding in mud. Fog obliterates everything they need to show them where they are. They hardly know what they're doing, except of course, they do, and men are shot, bayonets are thrust so deeply into the other side's soldiers that the rifle has to be fired to get the bayonet out again. Martlow, who was shaking hands and drinking rum only two minutes before, is hit by a bullet that blows the back of his head away. Bourne is enraged, and Sergeant Tozer tells him to steady himself, then comments on the fact that he's got (Martlow's) blood all over him. Manning manages this part of his narrative skilfully, showing us confusion with clarity, letting us see whatever the fog allows the men to see. It's a scene of greatest simplicity; life and death are wrestling, engaging many hundreds of men, most of whom don't know each other and few of whom can see each other. Death is everywhere, and those still alive are doing their best to

remain so, while handing out death at every chance. There is a weird moment when some of their own front-line men, terrified by the reception they've met, run away from the battle, and those still coming forward jeer at the cowardice – this is what it would be called, though it's natural – of their own men. 'For a moment they might have broken and run themselves, and for a moment they might have fought men of their own blood, but they struggled on ...' Manning tells us. This is where the evenness of his prose gives him freedom to move wherever in the confusion there's something to report.

Manning is as easy with philosophical reflection as he is with action, and as good with the atmospheric, if I may use the word in this context, of battle as he is with soldiers' conversations and things shouted in the heat of fighting. I think he can do this because his writing is not simply the voice of Private Bourne. Manning is speaking on behalf of the civilisation of which he is a part, and he's not restricting himself to the thinking of those who rule Great Britain's empire. He recognises that a civilisation is composed of the abject as well as the articulate, those with few options as much as those with many. He knows he has Shakespeare behind him, of course. Here's what he puts at the start of Chapter 16:

*We see yonder the beginning of day, but I think we shall never see the end of it ... I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle.*

Bourne lasts a few hours longer, but doesn't see the end of the battle. He's shot, and Weeper Smart carries his dying comrade back to the trenches where he would have been ... safe, after a fashion. This

causes us to reflect on Manning's use of Weeper, the most strongly drawn character in the book. Bourne always calls him 'Smart', but the other soldiers protect themselves by using his nickname derisively, trying to block out what he's too honest not to say. He's the ultimate pessimist, and because the soldiers' situation is as bad as it is, he's always right. Manning quotes him again and again.

Then the officer came to the concluding paragraph of the instructional letter.

'It is not expected that the enemy will offer any very serious resistance at this point ...'

There came a whisper scarcely louder than a sigh.

'What fuckin' 'opes we've got!'

The still small voice was that of Weeper Smart ...

A couple of pages later, the men are discussing the war: Pacey, whom I mentioned a little earlier, says, '... but what I want to know is what all us'ns are fighting for ...'

'We're fightin' for all we've bloody got,' said Madeley, bluntly.

'An that's sweet fuck all,' said Weeper Smart. 'A tell thee, that all a want to do is save me own bloody skin. An' the first thing a do, when we go into t'line, is to find out where t'bloody dressing stations are; an' if a can get a nice blighty, chaps, when once me face is turned towards home, I'm laughing. You won't see me bloody arse for dust. A'm not proud. A tell thee straight. Them as thinks different can 'ave all the bloody war they want, and me own share of it, too.'

What do I want to show, by enlisting Weeper, Bourne, Madeley, Mr Clinton and the rest of them? I think I want the reader to notice that these are not so much the voices of individuals, as voices from the mass, and that the whole, the mass, is European civilisation, it's fighting itself, it often does, it will do so again, and each and every conflict will force those engaged in it to see themselves as living creatures brought face to face with the immediate probability of their own extinction. They will be killed by people very like themselves: *like* because the viewpoint being adopted by the writer, that of the whole civilisation considering itself, reduces human differences to minuscule proportions. Weeper, Madeley, all the men, may be speaking with great power, for those who are accustomed to listen to such as them, but these rank and file soldiers are of the minutest significance to those whose counsels control the war. Manning hears the soldiers because each of them is thinking for himself, he listens, he records, occasionally he joins in, but his real achievement was to write down what he remembered them saying. He was Shakespearean in that, and Shakespeare gained a new lease on life by being quoted in *The Middle Parts Of Fortune*. It's a book that draws its life from saying what mustn't be forgotten.

This is something the book can do because it speaks in many ways. Officers, men, the French people whose places of living are being ravaged, the French women whose presence is a corrective to the masculinity of the soldiers every time that they, the women, appear ... all speak, and think, according to their habits, training, background, and the effects of whatever's in their vicinity. I've said, often enough, that Manning is speaking for the whole civilisation;

it's something he'd been preparing himself to do for many years. He had his few months at the front line and then he knew all he needed to know. He waited another decade until it had been digested, had all settled, in his thought, then he wrote it down. The sentences pour out with the inevitability of unshakeable thought:

The drumming of the guns continued, with bursts of great intensity. It was as though a gale streamed overhead, piling up great waves of sound, and hurrying them onward to crash in surf on the enemy entrenchments. The windless air about them, by its very stillness, made that unearthly music more terrible to hear ...

At the beginning of this essay I quoted the opening of the book. There was some shelling then, too, but it was behind the action, because the battle lay behind Bourne and the remnants of his battalion. At the end of the book, the battle lies ahead, and then it's all about them – the men, the reader too. Manning, who doesn't want for technique, pulls a trick on the reader at the start. He gets Bourne and the other remnants out of the battle, sums up by using the man who took his pipe out of his mouth to spit – 'a fuckin' fine mob' – and then he gives us four pages, almost all of it in one huge paragraph, of Bourne's memories of the action that's already over. 'It is infinitely more horrible and revolting to see a man shattered and eviscerated, than to see him shot. And one sees such things; and one suffers vicariously, with the inalienable sympathy of man for man. One forgets quickly. The mind is averted as well as the eyes.' But when Frederic Manning sat down to write, ten years after the war had finished, his mind concentrated on those things which

had caused him – them – to turn away. What he saw, the second time, became his book.

A book is not an easy thing to create. It is a mass, even, perhaps, a mountain, of thought. The thought exists in one mind, and must be made ready, laid out, for other minds to take it in. This making ready, laying out, and taking in, are the matters of writing and reading. The broadest, the subtlest of minds, minds in all their variety must be catered for. It's almost impossible to write a book without excluding some who aren't ready for it. A well written book is like the procedures of law; it must be comprehensible, and fair, to all. Or so I feel when I've had my head in Manning's pages for a time. I want to mention now an oddity, a minor sub-theme: the matter of Private Bourne's suitability to be sent away for officer training. It crops up frequently in the book, and could be read as a claim that Bourne doesn't belong in the ranks, where he's chosen to be. I don't think this would be the right way to take it. I think we should read it in the opposite direction – that the officers should be listening to their men, as Bourne is; that the voices of the men – Weeper, Madeley, Pacey and the rest – are the more thoughtful voices of the army, and that European civilisation works in a certain way. Its policies demand a price, and the voices of the men are the voices of that part of civilisation which pays most of the price. The benefits are unevenly distributed, and so are the costs, the suffering. Manning wants to make this clear, so Bourne 'should be' an officer; notice, though, that he's killed before he achieves the promotion. From the very last page:

Bourne was sitting: his head back, his face plastered with mud, and blood drying thickly about his mouth and chin,

while the glazed eyes stared up at the moon. Tozer moved away, with a quiet acceptance of the fact. 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 about it, there's a bit of a mystery about all of us. He pushed aside the blanket screening the entrance, and in the murky light he saw all the men lift their faces, and look at him with patient, almost animal eyes.

The book has only a couple of lines until it ends:

Then they all bowed over their own thoughts again, listening to the shells bumping heavily outside, as Fritz began to send a lot of stuff over in retaliation for the raid. They sat there silently; each man keeping his own secret.

So, powerless and put upon as the men are, they preside over their own thoughts. They possess their own souls until a bullet, a shell, separates the two, leaving them as Bourne has been left, staring eyelessly at the sky. Manning's in no doubt as to who's carrying the pains and punishments of civilisation. Ordinary people cop it, as a result of decisions made in offices, at cabinet tables, in places of command. Ordinary people cop it, but their humanity is increased as they take on the suffering. It's a message that comes out again and again in this book. I'm writing about Manning's themes and his techniques in presenting these themes. Let me offer a few more, very simple examples of his way of working. Sometimes he can be so simple as to seem inconsequential:

He was instantly aware of the presence of another in his neighbourhood, and always very keenly and definitely. After a few minutes, he met a couple of men in the twilit street.

'Good night, chum,' they called out to him, softly.

'Good night.'

And they were gone again, the unknown shadows, gone almost as quickly and inconspicuously as bats into the dusk; and they would all go like that ultimately, as they were gathering to go now, migrants with no abiding place, whirled up on the wind of some irresistible impulse. What would be left of them soon would be no more than a little flitting memory in some twilit mind.

Here's a moment during a kit inspection, which reveals that Bourne's helmet – his *tin hat* - needs to be replaced.

'See that this man has a new steel-helmet by tonight,' said Mr Marsden imperiously.

'There are none here, sir,' protested the sergeant-major. 'There may be a few at the quarter-master's stores in Noeux-les-Mines; but even there, they've probably got all their stuff packed ready for the move.'

'Then see that he gets one at the first possible opportunity,' said Mr Marsden; and with this indefinite extension of his original time-limit he passed, somewhat hastily, to a detailed criticism of the next man's deficiencies.

Nothing is going to be done, plainly. Let us move now to an incident not long before the final attack – final for the book, that is,

for it describes events of 1916, and the war had two and a half years to run. Bourne has tried to buy some delicacies in the Expeditionary Forces Canteen, which was set up for all ranks to enjoy, but the officers have sequestered it for themselves, and Bourne has been told to go around the back, where he might get some cocoa and biscuits. Martlow and Shem go round the back, but not Bourne! He gives money and a list to a soldier called Evans who has access to the canteen.

‘For Gawd’s sake don’t mention cocoa and biscuits to ‘im,’ said Evans. ‘You’d better go and take him back to billets, before ‘e starts fightin’ a policeman. Everybody seems to be in a bloody bad temper today. All got wind-up, I suppose.’

‘All got wind-up’; fear and acceptance colour the book; the men are dignified when they’ve got control of themselves, and most of them, most of the time, have this control, officers and men. Each of them is carrying a load that’s too terrible to bear so none of them want others’ fears unloaded on them. Here’s a passage about the death of Mr Clinton, ordered to take a working party to the line at night, and ordered to do so in a way that suggests, quite unjustly, that perhaps he’s been dodging the danger.

‘They got Mr Clinton all right. One of them sausages came over and blew most of ‘is guts out. No, ‘e’s not dead, they gave ‘im morphia, and took ‘im away on a stretcher. Well, if ‘e’s not dead yet, ‘e pretty soon will be.’

‘Who’s that?’ said Corporal Reynolds, sitting up.

‘Mr Clinton, Corporal; ‘is number’s up all right. It fair made

me sick to see ‘im. ‘e was conscious too. ‘e said ‘e knew ‘e was going to get it up ‘ere. ‘e knew it.’

Bourne did not move, he lay absolutely still in his blankets, with an emotion so tense that he thought something would snap in him.

Horrible as such moments are, the men can find excitement, too, in their position:

Immediately after dinner, a thrill of excitement passed rapidly from company to company: all parades were cancelled, billets were to be cleaned up, and the battalion was to be ready to march at half-past five. It was some time since they had marched by night. For once, too, they had some definite details: they were to march to St Pol, and entrain there 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 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 too 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.

I think that with that passage I can quit my sampling of Manning's writing. He's giving voice to those who fought in the war that he fought in himself. He's rendering the experience of many hundreds of thousands, and his writing is personal only insofar as each of the men appearing in his pages has to make sense of experience for himself. That's why they talk so much, so philosophically, about their situation. The things that they've experienced, and the things that are waiting for them when the next attack starts, are not the same as the official messages read out on parade or blathered at them when they go on leave and see and hear what's happening where they've come from, back home. The war means that home will never be home again for those who've fought. A generation's being changed, when they're not being killed, and generations that follow will be different too. Manning knows this, and he charts it as best he can, with surprising humility. He knows that where he is – or was, as we must say, for he wrote the book some years after the war had ended – was the worst of places, the most dangerous, but was, for someone bent on understanding the world's experience, probably the best place one could be to learn, observe, and record, so that some truth could be set down for those of later generations who become curious about what actually happened ... way back then.