INTRODUCTION

Dennis Brown and Jenny Plastow

The theme of Englishness permeates Ford Madox Ford’s work overall, and it is most directly articulated in his trilogy England and the English (1905-7).¹ As many comments and references in the contributions to this book indicate, the early years of the twentieth century – the moment of transition between late Victorian and Edwardian culture – are characterised by a literary preoccupation with the contemporary state of the nation. And it was one of Ford’s friends, C. F. G. Masterman, who memorably encapsulated this phenomenon in the title and subject-matter of his book The Condition of England (1909).² Long after its publication, the phrase ‘condition of England’ became a critical genre-term to categorise such disparate novels as H. G. Wells’s Tono-Bungay (1909), E. M. Forster’s Howards End (1910) or D. H. Lawrence’s Women in Love (1920), with Ford’s own Parade’s End (1924-8) having a strong claim for inclusion in the genre. At the same time Ford’s editorship, from 1908, of The English Review, indicated his commitment to a contemporary Englishness, even though, as Jason Harding’s chapter indicates, the title also enabled him to smuggle in much excellent international writing, while devoting his editorials to largely national issues. Ford’s early writing on the English theme, in fact, was situated within a large context of various and developing discourses about national identity – a turn of the century collective negotiation of ideas about nation conducted largely through narration.³

Ford’s The Spirit of the People (1907) endeavours to create a kind of synthesis between the shock-thesis of The Soul of London (1905) and the traditionalist antithesis of The Heart of the Country (1906). From the perspective of the new millennium, it appears now as idealistic myth rather than even an ‘impressionistic’ version of contemporary social reality. It also constructs a vision which seems essentially middle-class, male-oriented and largely evocative of South East life and culture – and, for all its disclaimers, participates in the very English ‘optimism’ and ‘self-deception’ (257) which Ford notes. England, he says, is ‘generally humane beyond belief’ (237): it is a
‘hospice on the long road to a western Atlantic’ (263); it believes in muddling through (267), that ‘God is good’ (289), that the accused always deserves the ‘benefit of the doubt’ (302), that contentious ‘things’ should be omitted from social discourse (312) and that to ‘play the game’ (316) is essential to the good life. Perhaps unnecessarily, Ford seems ambivalent about his own national status – ‘a nationality that is more or less my own’ (244), or ‘the nation that gives me shelter’ (311). Yet, as some of the contributions below indicate, this may be dictated by his own attractions to Germany, France and the United States, and hence the direction of his own future loyalties rather than a genuine sense of an outsider’s role (the name of Hueffer notwithstanding). However, his final tribute in this trilogy to England and Englishness is as positive as the most perfervid patriot might hope to wish, especially from an exponent of the ‘arts’:

... if these people be not the chosen people, this land will always be one that every race would choose for its birthings and its buryings until the last Aaron shall lead the last of the conquering legions across the world. (326)

As is evident in many of the chapters below, such sentiments are expressed and tested in Ford’s many works, whether in fiction, expository prose or poetry. Rooted in the early twentieth-century ‘moment’ as they are, they connect his writing to the preoccupations of his contemporary colleagues, and also with those of one hundred years later. For, after the ‘finest hour’ of 1940-2 and the slow dissolution of Empire in the post-war years, and in the midst of recent devolution-politics, a revival of literary interest in England and Englishness has been going on. Nationalism, in itself, has been much discussed: English history reworked for a newer generation, TV programmes and journalistic reassessments have made the topic of Englishness of the moment again. A successful chain of shops opened in response to the British desire to buy nostalgia, Past Times, has a video collection almost identical with that available for the British expatriate community in Kampala’s British Council library; back numbers of British television series, Agatha Christie’s Poirot and Miss Marple, Evelyn Waugh’s Brideshead Revisited; Upstairs Downstairs, Jewel in the Crown, Tenko; all soft-focusing perceptions of what Englishness was, at home and abroad. At the same time, writers such as Peter Ackroyd (with The Soul of London in mind) have focused on the metropolis, novelists have drawn on the countryside as backdrop for everything from romantic idyll to murder mysteries, and poets
such as Glyn Maxwell (*The Breakage*, 1998), George Szirtes (*An English Apocalypse*, 2001) or Geoffrey Hill (*The Orchards of Syon*, 2002), have taken Englishness as a major motif. Indeed, in his preface to the *Apocalypse* collection (2001), Szirtes, a Hungarian ‘refugee’, describes an England very close to Ford’s evocation:

> England, for me, for all of us, was the place where Nature, and by extension, the World, grew cultivated and inhabited: however despoiled it might have become, it embodied a gentle but imperial dream of enlightened subduing.\(^6\)

It has become established that ‘England’ is an ‘imagined’ or ‘imaginary’\(^7\) community rather than a historical entity. And the issue has become complicated (as anticipated in Ford’s work) by the ‘special relationship’ with America and the inclusion of the nation within an expanding European Union. Perhaps, then, it is no accident (as they say) that the revival of interest in Ford’s writing – emblematised and stimulated by the University of London Ford Madox Ford conference of November 1996 – should have roughly corresponded with the renewed interest in Englishness. Yet when the editors first mooted a book about Ford in this context, it was difficult to imagine what the response from contributors might be – especially from American and European academics. However, the Ford Madox Ford Society’s conference in Manchester in December 2004 provided an answer to this, and most of the essays in this volume were first aired there, with many stimulating ideas on Ford and Englishness and the range of Ford’s work emerging as a genuinely international collocation. At the time, the contributions seemed to organise themselves into an interconnected selection on specific topics – and this contributed to the structure and opportunities for discussion of a successful event.

However, for the purposes of this book, the editors have preferred to adopt an approximately chronological organisation. This was partly because thematic structure, in cold print, tends to rather arbitrary classification which restricts the scope of argument in any one chapter and may be felt to be reductive by contributors. More positively, it is hoped the chronological arrangement will help readers identify particular periods and texts of interest within the large Ford canon. In addition, it serves to demonstrate Ford’s ongoing meditations on England and the English, from earlier years, through the Great War experience and into national exile.
The book commences with Philip Davis’s urbane and wide-ranging consideration of Ford as representative of an English ‘remnant’ – the ‘invisible church’, as it were, of national identity and integrity. Ralph Parfect’s essay then embeds the topic in terms of Ford’s placement within a literary tradition of adventure writing, immediately followed by Sara Haslam’s expanded and adapted version of her Introduction to the valuable republication of England and the English – Ford’s quite early and direct indication of the central issue, with reference to London, the country and the spirit of Englishness. This is followed, in turn, by Andrzej Gasiorek’s ‘Ford Among the Aliens’ which has stimulating things to say about The Soul of London in particular and Ford’s importance as an early proponent of multiculturalism. Karen McDermott and Donald Mackenzie write about The Fifth Queen trilogy and its importance in rendering a key era of change in the formation of Englishness (the reign of Henry VIII) – discussions which are then given a different perspective by Peter Easingwood’s examination of Ford in relation to literary myth and history-writing.

Jason Harding’s contribution marks a brief period of Ford’s apparent centrality in modern letters as editor of The English Review, a time when he contrives to make international modernism a factor in contemporary English sensibility. Nick Hubble on the ‘English’ trilogy and The Good Soldier indicates how the experimentalism of The Good Soldier is connected to the sociological insights of the books on national identity, while Christine Berberich works a similar point concerning the idea of the gentleman in the best-known modernist texts. This brings the book’s chronology to the phenomenon of the Great War. Anurag Jain’s essay shows how Ford the novelist and poet lent his talents to nationalist propaganda in this struggle. Jenny Plastow examines the theme of ‘work’ in Ford’s distinctive notion of national consciousness, including soldiering-as-work, while Austin Riede reminds us that, despite the international catastrophe of the war, there are important links between The Good Soldier and Ford’s post-war masterpiece Parade’s End. At this point, Jörg Rademacher’s demonstration of the problems involved in translating Ford’s war tetralogy into German is a salutary reminder that even the 1914-18 clash of nations should be placed within a wider context of international literary culture – Parade’s End reconsidered, as it were, in the language of Thomas Mann’s The Magic Mountain.
In the post-war period, Ford – like several other English writers – eventually left England. After some years in Paris, for a while he taught in America, and Robert McDonough’s chapter on *The Rash Act* and *Henry For Hugh* indicates Ford’s ongoing negotiation of Anglo-Saxon ‘doubling’ in terms of English and American identities. At the same time, Christopher MacGowan’s essay on *Great Trade Route* casts light on Ford’s fantasy of a ‘real England’ (like the ‘remnant’) embodied in the USA and connected up by the seaways and highways of global civilisation. The book concludes with a more general essay, where Dennis Brown endeavours to cover Ford’s specifically ‘English’ poetry from 1893 to 1921.

The contributions, then, address the main part of Ford’s literary career – most particularly the years when he lived in England and was committed to its cultural health. In his later years, Ford moved to Paris, where his founding of *The Transatlantic Review* promoted international modernism rather than the native tradition. At the same time, his great war-sequence, *Parade’s End*, constituted a modernist version in writing of ‘The Last of England’ – the title of a famous painting by his grandfather, Ford Madox Brown. However, his imagined Englishness survived his retirement abroad, and beyond specific fictions is evidenced in the memoirs and essays he wrote later. Both in America and, towards the end in Provence, Ford’s thinking about national identity and international culture is both implicit and explicit in his writings, and in the very reminiscent, ‘amateur’ style he used to represent a life. It is, one might suggest, a very English trait to look back at one’s experience of native life in meditation rather than plan some revolutionary alternative.

Considering the various chapters overall, it is noticeable to the ‘postmodern’ mind how much Ford’s various renderings of Englishness manifest the inherent constructedness of the term, and of other related terms such as ‘nation’, ‘identity’ or indeed ‘gentleman’. Not only this, but the writings are inherently self-aware of such representational constructedness. Here Ford’s use of irony, impressionism and hyperbolic anecdotage invite, as Max Saunders’s biography suggests, a reconsideration of Ford’s earlier reputation as fantasist, exaggerator or even liar. Ford’s progressive texts indicate and enact within themselves, all the issues of relativistic viewpoint, false-memory syndrome and the inevitable subordination of ‘real’ world to artificial word (the ‘linguistic turn’) which are a commonplace of contemporary cultural intelligence.
Put more sceptically, Ford’s self-knowing literary rhetoric subtly suggests that there can be no Englishness-as-essence, only an imagined community conveyed by imaginative language – a view that should blunt the polysyllabic self-confidence of our current ‘theorists’ of nationalism. Further, his work insists on the historical relativity of specific Englishnesses. Or, as Robert Colls and Philip Dodd put it, ‘Englishness has had to be constantly reproduced’. Ford does this by focusing on what he finds to be critical periods in the making of Englishness – for instance, the Protestant revolution (The Fifth Queen), the cultural remnants of ‘Dutch William’s’ Glorious Revolution (Parade’s End), turn of the twentieth century modernity (England and the English) and the Great War and its aftermath (When Blood is Their Argument, The Marsden Case, Parade’s End, The Rash Act etc). Englishness, Ford shows, is not a stable and unitary concept but a changeable ideal, always dependent (in the era of print-hegemony at least) on the kind of language used. In that sense, this book is a specific successor to the previous volumes in the International Ford Madox Ford Studies series – History and Representation in Ford Madox Ford’s Writings, edited by Joseph Wiesenfarth, and Ford Madox Ford and the City, edited by Sara Haslam.

One thing that might be hoped for, however – a preliminary definition of ‘Englishness’ – is deliberately absent. In this sense, the book is critically descriptive rather than analytically theoretical in the manner of, say, Krishan Kumar’s interesting The Making of English Identity. Its aim is to show how Ford, by a variety of literary means, addresses and, somewhat sceptically and impressionistically, represents a multi-dimensional Englishness-in-the-making, with its inevitable backdrop:

... the air is thick
with the noise of the past, so it is hard to see
what it is made of, what all this rhetoric
is actually about.
NOTES


2 As noted in Dennis Brown’s contribution (below), Masterman also organised literary propaganda for the War Ministry – to which Ford contributed.


8 i.e. The Soul of London (1905), The Heart of the Country (1906), The Spirit of the People (1907). The composite book was published, at the time, only in America, with an ‘Author’s Note’: England and the English: An Interpretation, New York: McClure, Phillips and Co., 1907.


