GRANDMOTHER AND WOLFE TONE

HUBERT BUTLER

With a Foreword by
DERVLA MURPHY

THE LILLIPUT PRESS
DUBLIN
1990

FOR PEGGY

By the same author

ESSAYS
Escape from the Anthill (Mullingar: The Lilliput Press, 1985, paperback, 1986)
Wolfe Tone and the Common Name of Irishman (Mullingar: Lilliput Pamphlets/The Lilliput Press, 1985)
The Children of Drancy (Mullingar: The Lilliput Press, 1988)

HISTORY

TRANSLATION
The Thief by Leonid Leonov (London: Martin Secker, 1931)
The Cherry Orchard by Chekhov (London: H. W. Deane, 1934)
THE CITY

You said: 'I'll seek some other land, far off, with
sails unfurled.
I'll find a worthier town than this and some
serener clime.
For here ambition foiled is like a crime,
the quickening impulse of the heart is dead,
and sluggish thoughts entomb the past like
lead.
Whichever way eyes glance or footsteps go,
the embers of a burnt-out ardour glow,
the scorched and broken years into the ash-pit hurled.'

You'll find no other lands, my friend, speeding
with sails unfurled.
Your city will go with you. Through its streets
and squares
you'll still be strolling, as you strolled, despite
your prayers.
You'll age beside the hearth you once held dear,
thinking familiar thoughts. No ship will steer
your heart, new-fallowed, to a virgin strand.
You wrecked your life in this poor, stubborn
land.
It's wrecked beyond repair for all the world.

(Translated from the Greek of C. P. CAVAFY in memory
of James Joyce and Trieste)

JAMES BOURCHIER:
AN IRISHMAN IN BULGARIA

I wonder what is thought of my compatriot James Bourschier in
Bulgaria today? Is there still a street called Bourschier Street: or
have you become critical of the man who was once held in such
high esteem in Bulgaria that when he was buried near Rilo
Monastery in December 1920, a day of national mourning was
declared in Sofia? An issue of postage stamps was made to com-
memorate him. Perhaps that is now of interest only to the
stamp-collectors, or is Bourschier himself still remembered with
affection?

Now, in every country, reputations change rapidly and we
judge the great men of the past according to different standards.
James Bourschier was a man of his time and the Bulgaria of a
generation ago, with all its special problems, has passed away. I
ask you, though, to think of him now not simply as a political
partisan, a man whose strong championship of Bulgarian claims
certainly changed history. Think of him instead as a warm-heart-
ed and intelligent foreigner, an Irishman who rose above the
prejudices of his nation, his class and his profession, and who
tried always to speak the truth about Bulgaria even when it
made him enemies.

It is not generally known that James Bourschier was an
Irishman. The greater part of his life was spent in English ser-
vice so his Irish origin escaped notice. Yet he was very much an
Irishman belonging to the Protestant minority. Unfortunately for
us who remain at home, the Protestant Irishman is often bound
to England by close ties of self-interest and imperial service as
well as of religion. His working days he gives to others. Ireland
is a place for childhood and holidays and old age. That was
what it was to James Bourschier.
GRANDMOTHER AND WOLFE TONE

The Bourchiers were a Huguenot family from Bruff, Co. Limerick, who had taken refuge in Ireland almost three centuries ago when Protestants were being persecuted in France. James's mother, Sarah Aher, came from my neighbourhood and her home, La Rive, became his home whenever he came back from Bulgaria. So when I was a boy I remember seeing him in the village of Castlecomer where his home was. It is a small mining village, the only mining village in Ireland, with one long street shaded with lime trees, and his house was comparatively new for the original house had been burnt down in the rebellion of 1798 when the Irish had tried to throw off English rule. Bourchier, as an Irishman born in 1850, must have heard from his boyhood of rebellion and civil war. He must have been familiar with the rival claims of nationalism and imperialism. The Irish problem is not unique, and those who have grown up with it will not be easily baffled by the problems of other small peoples who have powerful neighbours. Bourchier put all his gifts of imagination and understanding at the service of Bulgaria; he played no part in Irish politics. I say this with regret because I think in his own country he could have exercised a great and good influence where it was badly needed.

When I saw him he was already an elderly man, bowed and so deaf that it was almost impossible to communicate with him. It was in 1919 and at that time, as a century before, our neighbourhood was in the grip of civil war. Houses were once more being burnt down and Ireland was only in sight of that political independence which Bulgaria had reached a generation before.

It was a queer chance that brought Bourchier from Ireland to Bulgaria in 1888. When he had left Trinity College, Dublin, and King's College, Cambridge, to which he had won a scholarship, he became first a teacher at Eton. He was a bad teacher: for even then he was very deaf and he could not keep discipline. One evening, when he was taking class, the boys turned all the lights off and had a fireworks display. After ten years there his deafness grew worse and the school reluctantly to dismiss him. He was greatly liked but he was obviously unfitted for his profession.

What was he to do? He chose journalism and soon he found himself as correspondent of The Times in the Balkans. He travelled in Greece, Romania, Crete and Serbia - but it was Bulgaria to which he finally gave his heart and in which he established his headquarters.

JAMES BOURCHIER: AN IRISHMAN IN BULGARIA

The work of a correspondent of a great paper is not easy. How can you tell the truth consistently and keep your job? Inevitably, the policy of the paper may be in conflict with the private views of the correspondent, and Bourchier was often charged with being unwisely pro-Bulgarian. But he never compromised. He wrote back angrily when he was chided, and a couple of times he was saved from dismissal only by the fact that he was known to be the most accomplished journalist in the Balkans. In any case he was no blind partisan. If he thought the foreign policy of the Bulgarian government at fault he said so, though this made him unpopular. King Ferdinand, for example, never forgave him for being too candid in his criticism of the King's ministers and their policy.

Bourchier's deafness was such an appalling handicap that only a man of supreme talent could have overcome it. Often urgent telephoning was necessary and he had to get his servant or a hotel porter to do it for him. All his private negotiations had to be conducted at the top of his voice. When he was on an important mission in Greece he chose the slopes of Mount Pelion for his private talks with Venizeleos. Riding there every day, they were able to bawl at each other from horseback. It was in this way that Bourchier acted as intermediary between Greece and Bulgaria in forming the alliance that preceded the first Balkan War.

Bulgaria was, when Bourchier arrived, only just emerging into partial freedom and independence. Eastern Roumelia was still held for the Turks by a Christian governor. Macedonia was wholly Turkish. Every year Bourchier used to spend a few weeks exploring Macedonia, arranging secret interviews with the men who were conspiring to overthrow the Turk. Bourchier was passionately pro-Bulgarian but he was an even more passionate advocate of the truth. Let me explain how he fell out with King Ferdinand.

The Moslems were constantly attacking the Bulgars in Macedonia and inevitably the Bulgars would retaliate with reprisals on the Moslems in the territory they controlled. On one occasion the village of Dospat was burnt to the ground, and many Moslems, as Bourchier wrote in The Times, were massacred. The Bulgarian government published an indignant denial but Bourchier stuck to his guns. The Times insisted that the report must be verified or withdrawn. Bourchier received threats of assassination.
Finally, the Bulgarian government permitted Bourchier to go to the spot and investigate himself. He went and found the village a charred and looted ruin, as he anticipated, but he also found the number of massacred greatly exaggerated. As usually happens, neither side was satisfied with his revised account of the massacre. But though Bourchier made enemies, yet even they ultimately began to respect his integrity and his desire for the truth at all costs. He cared nothing for popularity with the powerful and often he would intervene when he found, for example, that some village was being encroached upon by the authorities. It was seen that he was not out for profit and that he did not change his loyalties easily.

To the staff of The Times Bulgaria was a remote and unimportant country. The problems of Macedonia were insignificant compared to those of India. 'Is it wise', the editor once wrote to Bourchier, 'to risk annoying the Moslems, subjects of the British empire, by supporting the Bulgarians against the Moslem rulers in Bosnia?' Bourchier argued out this point with heat. He hated all this high diplomacy; The Times was not, he maintained, a branch of the British Foreign Office and should not reflect its policy. As for the need to placate the Indian Moslems, had they been in the least gratified by the British protests against the annexation of Bosnia by Austria-Hungary? Had they been annoyed when the British had supported the Greeks in their expulsion of the Moslems from Crete? 'Magna est veritas et praevalebit.'

Bourchier was, as you will have deduced, rather a lonely figure – or perhaps I should say not 'lonely' but spiritually isolated. He never lacked warm and loyal friends, either in England or Ireland or Bulgaria. But he was always at war with the cynical imperialism of the great powers to which small peoples like the Bulgars were continually sacrificed. He was repelled by the commercial competitiveness of great newspapers like The Times, which valued early news more than true news. His life was soured for years by 'an infamous telegram', as he called it, which The Times sent him; in it he was blamed because another paper had forestalled The Times in announcing the proclamation of the total independence of Bulgaria by the King in 1908. As a matter of fact, by an odd chance, the news had first been released in Paris and Bourchier was not even technically to blame. But Bourchier was deeply wounded that the telegram dismissing him was sent for all to read and that another English journalist was sent to replace him. However, Bourchier was, it proved, the only man for the job and soon he was at it again. But a year later he noted in his diary: 'Today is the anniversary of the infamous telegram.' Bourchier was too sensitive and scrupulous to make an entirely dependable journalist and there were frequent breezes of this kind. But he was irreplaceable and he knew it. He stayed on.

As mentioned, Bourchier played a very influential part, acknowledged by all the Greek and Bulgarian leaders of the time, in cementing the Greco-Bulgarian alliance of 1911-12. It was a fine achievement, for Bulgars and Greeks had been enemies for close on eight centuries and there were still bitter memories of the attempt by the Phanariot Greeks to suppress Bulgarian culture. Bourchier's tact and persuasiveness turned the scale in favour of the alliance.

It was not only the prominent Bulgarians who were grateful to Bourchier. A group of Macedonians sent him as a prized gift a horse called 'Yaver' and a letter which ran as follows: 'The Bulgarians will never forget your defence of their national ideals and your fight for their realization in past and present, when the whole world has turned against the suffering Bulgarian nation.' Bourchier cherished this horse all his life and used to ride it every day from the Boris Gardens along the Constantinople Road.

Bourchier was distressed when the Greeks refused to withdraw from Adrianople which had been awarded by treaty to Bulgaria, but he was equally taken by surprise at the Bulgarian attack on their former allies which led to the disastrous Treaty of Bucharest, when Bulgaria lost almost all that she had gained. Had he known, he would have tried to avert this quarrel by those methods of conciliation at which he was such an adept. He believed strongly in the friendship, perhaps the federation, of the Balkan peoples, but at that time the enemies of Bulgaria regarded Bourchier as the leader of a conspiracy to keep them apart.

A Greek newspaper, Atlantis, in February 1914 wrote how Bourchier had been given a vast estate from a confiscated monastery and how he used to spend hours in the Bulgarian Foreign Office concocting and circulating faked atrocity stories about the conduct of the Greek troops in Macedonia. Of course
there was not a word of truth in all this.

One amusing episode occurred illustrating the great influence of Bourchier, and the efforts made by the Greeks to counteract it. A well-known London actor called Arthur Bourchier was approached by some prominent Greeks and invited to go to the Balkans at their expense. From there he was to send articles to a rival English newspaper. He was to sign them ‘Bourchier’, but he need not, they kindly explained, write them. That would be done for him. It was hoped that the British public would be so confused by seeing the famous name affixed to Greek propaganda that they would think that the great man had either gone out of his mind or else changed it. The tempting offer of a free holiday was declined.

When the war of 1914 broke out Bourchier tried to make the Allies promise to Bulgaria the provinces that were hers by right of population. He was bitterly disappointed with his failure. When Bulgaria sided with Germany, as a British subject Bourchier had to leave. But he left with the goodwill of the Bulgarian people. In gratitude for Bourchier’s service the government released Ivan, his old servant and friend, from conscription in the army, so that he could look after Bourchier’s affairs for him, and in particular his horse Yaver, given him by the Macedonians.

From Bucharest Bourchier wrote: ‘Though you have chosen the wrong side in the war, I do not forget your cause is just and, when peace comes, I shall defend the legitimate rights of the Bulgarian nation.’

But by the time peace arrived Bourchier had become an old man and tired. In the violent passions aroused by the war there was little scope for his calm, well-instructed intervention. He returned for the last time to Bulgaria and there he died, at Sofia on 30 December 1920. He was buried, as he wished, in a valley near the monastery of Rilo.

How did it come about that an Irishman could exercise so great an influence in the affairs of a foreign people? An Irishman would not be puzzled by that question, for Ireland too owes much to foreigners, who have sympathized with her cause and presented it truthfully and generously in the press and parliament of more powerful nations. And Bourchier not only served the Bulgarian cause but he loved the Bulgarian land and its people, and described them in prose. He gave an unforgettable

account of Trnovo with ‘its houses clustered like sea-birds on the ocean crag’, and studied the birds, the flowers and the antiquities of Bulgaria. His paper on the Pomaks of Rhodope still has value. He wrote well and persuasively.

The days when a single man could exert so big an influence in a country not his own are perhaps long passed. We cannot wish them to return. Bourchier would now appear a very outlandish figure to most of us. Many of his views would strike us as old-fashioned and wrong. But it is not his views for which I ask your attention and respect but his loyalty, his warm-heartedness and his devoted search for justice and truth.

[1948]

Endnote This talk was written rapidly in London to be delivered in Sofia or, as a secondary choice, on the BBC or Radio Éireann. It was ‘intended to suggest bridges for friendly intercourse’ and drew principally from Lady Grogan’s Life of J. D. Bourchier published in 1924. In a note to the text the author has added:

I’ve tried to give an objective account of Bourchier as a man who was by temperament tied to no particular régime. Obviously his traditions and upbringing were such that he would not have been friendly to Communism, but that is a point I have naturally not stressed. Indeed it is irrelevant. His sense of justice often overcame his traditional conservative outlook. He would, I think, have remained today a firm and valuable, though probably critical, friend of Bulgaria.

It was never broadcast. (Ed.)