Shaping the 20th Century

Wendell V. Harris

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Book Reviews

Shaping the 20th Century

TO UNDERSTAND the significance for his time of the now almost forgotten writer brought before us by Angela John, one must imagine the decades at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries in which newspapers were the sole source of the latest news, in which the writers of newspaper leaders and “middles” were almost as well known, at least by educated readers, as television news anchors are today, in which reporters depended much less on government briefings than on firsthand investigations, and in which the style that a journalist commanded was of major importance. Imagine that time when war correspondents, hired by a particular newspaper for a specific mission, were often essentially freelance writers who more often than not walked or rode horseback wherever they chose to go amidst the battles. Imagine those years in which the censorship of war correspondents was less effective because the writers often said exactly what they wanted to say in widely read articles or books as soon as they returned from their assignments. Then also call to mind a period in which the English suffragist movement, though still thwarted, was gaining strength, and political unrest was developing in India, Europe, Asia, and Africa.

One may then picture the arrival in such a milieu of a writer with a classical education, a Hellenist who could write short stories, poems, essays, and literary biographies as readily as newspaper columns, who was an admirer of both Ruskin and Carlyle as well as Goethe, Herder, and Schiller, and who saw world events against the background of ancient and biblical history. Picture a correspondent who seems to have cherished the considerable dangers and difficulties he encountered on or near battlefield after battlefield despite recurrent illnesses and who always put being at the scene of the action above personal comfort or safety. Add that this writer was a strong supporter of the suffragist movement, was always ready to criticize officials with whom he disagreed, however important they might have been, was by nature
for the underdog, and, to paraphrase a current bumper sticker, loved his country but generally mistrusted its government.

The result of the confluence of the time and the man was the life of Henry Woodd Nevinson (1856–1941). Angela John’s piecing together of that life from a variety of sources, although considerably aided by the almost fifty years of diaries kept by Nevinson, was a major endeavor. John has chosen to focus her biography primarily on Nevinson’s life as a writer reporting wars and crises. That was the career that made his name widely known, the activity that he preferred, even though he did not become a war correspondent until he was forty. He covered the 1897 Graeco–Turkish War, the 1898 Spanish–American War, the 1899–1902 Anglo–Boer War (he was among those trapped in Ladysmith but had real sympathy for the Boers), the 1905 Revolution in Russia, the unrest in India in 1907, the 1909 campaign against the Riff in Spain, the 1912 and 1913 Balkan Wars, the Irish struggle for independence as it developed after 1919, and the First World War, including the disastrous campaign in the Dardanelles. In between he was exposing slavery in the Portuguese colonies (his personal investigation required facing major dangers and physical obstacles), championing the suffragist movement (in 1909 Nevinson resigned his position with the Daily News over suffrage issues), representing the Macedonian Relief Committee in Albania, reporting from Germany that the measures taken to punish the German people after WWI were laying the groundwork for further hostilities, defending the Irish people’s desire for self-government, defending conscientious objectors, speaking at many a public meeting—and writing thirty books. Among individuals whom he sought to defend were Roger Casement and Eugene Debs; among the events he deplored were the officially sanctioned murder of Francis Sheehy Skeffington (the Irish patriot), Russian repression in Georgia, the condemnation of Oscar Wilde, and the Nazi persecution of the Jews (before this was generally recognized).

Nevinson complained that war correspondents frequently had to find their own food, shelter, servant (!), and horses although at the same time he relished overcoming the hardships incident on following wars. He was grateful when the army or government sought to make the life of the correspondent easier, but one can imagine what he would scornfully have said of an “embedded” correspondent in the contemporary sense. He griped about censorship—although he understood the need of keeping information from the enemy, what he did not wish to accept were efforts to hide the sum of death and suffering inevitable in war,
on both sides and for both soldiers and civilians, or to pretend that a military action was less costly of human life or more successful than in fact it was.

Angela John does not seek to glorify Nevinson. She makes clear his prejudices and notes when his published accounts differ from what were apparently the facts. She does not seek to defend Nevinson's treatment of his first wife, Margaret (a very capable woman who was strenuously active in the suffragist movement and served as a Poor Law Guardian and a Justice of the Peace at a time when such positions were not seen as appropriate for a woman). While opting for an unusually adventurous life, and admiring women who lived such a life, Nevinson seems to have expected Margaret to stay at home (in less than ideal housing with a lean budget) and raise their two children. Nor does John gloss over Nevinson's poor relationships with his son Richard (C. R. W. Nevinson, whose reputation as an artist was first made by his unflinching depictions of World War I) and his daughter Philippa, nor his affairs, notably with Nannie Dryshurst and Evelyn Sharp (journalist, author, and fearless suffragette whom he married after the death of Margaret).

For a man of strong opinions who was rarely without a cause to champion vigorously, Nevinson had a multitude of friends, admirers, and allies. Among these were the writers Wells, Galsworthy, Hardy, Masefield, Shaw, and Zangwill; the artists William Rothenstein and Muirhead Bone; and liberal-minded activists such as Samuel Barnett (one of the founders of Toynbee Hall), the Pethick Lawrences (leaders of the suffragist and other social and political movements), T. E. Lawrence, J. L. Hammond (journalist and historian), Rabindranath Tagore, Motilal Nehru (father of Jawaharlal Nehru), General Ian Hamilton, Ramsay MacDonald (Labour Party leader and prime minister), C. R. Ashbee (founder of the Guild of Handicraft), J. W. MacKail (poet and critic, president of the British Academy) and Gopal Gokhale (moderate Indian statesman). His memorial service, organized by Vera Brittain, was presided over by E. M. Forster.

Following the account of Nevinson's activities in covering wars that occurred more or less a century ago is at times somewhat difficult—a reader would be well advised to have handy an atlas, a desk encyclopedia for looking up topics like the Balkan Wars and, if possible, the Concise Dictionary of National Biography. On the other hand, greater historical background and biographical identification would have produced a book less about Henry Nevinson than about his times—not
Angela John’s intent in this efficiently organized and tightly focused account.

Why give time to the reading of a biography of a largely forgotten war correspondent, even if he has been called the “King of Correspondents”? First, to know something of a man who not only reported but helped shape the perspective in which major events in history were viewed then and now (John quotes the comment of the publisher of the Washington Post: “journalism is the first draft of history”). Second, one may well find inspiration in the life of a man who, whatever his own failings, fought throughout his life for what he believed to be justice and who was often prescient in foreseeing the troubles that poor decisions in domestic and international politics would bring. Third, Nevison’s biography is unavoidably a reminder of history’s rather constant succession of wars and national tragedies caused by greed (both personal and governmental) and simple intellectual folly as seen at first hand by an intelligent and perspicacious observer who insisted on the hideousness of war; such a recognition may help give perspective to current world tragedies.

Wendell V. Harris
Emeritus Professor, Pennsylvania State University

Reappraising Hardy

Keith Wilson, ed. Thomas Hardy Reappraised: Essays in Honour of Michael Millgate. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. xxiii + 304 pp. $65.00 £40.00

In his introduction to Thomas Hardy Reappraised, Keith Wilson points out that before Michael Millgate’s publication of Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist in 1971, biographical information about Hardy was greatly limited, his novels and poems existed in inferior editions, few of his letters had appeared in print, only one of Hardy’s notebooks had been adequately edited and, because of all this, critics were hampered by a lack of solid information about Hardy. Today that situation has greatly changed—in very large measure as a result of the profoundly original scholarly achievement of Michael Millgate. This festschrift by fifteen well-known scholars is an expression of gratitude for that extraordinary accomplishment, and what is appropriately striking about such a collection of studies is how remarkably original and how soundly scholarly they are.

The collection opens with Pamela Dalziel’s “The Gospel According to Hardy” in which she reprints a newly discovered, strikingly evangelical sermon, written and signed by Hardy when he was eighteen...