

Atlantic Fury

H.Innes

August 13-14, 2016

Hammond Innes was a prolific writer, producing at least thirty novels. Obviously they sold well and I gather he was something of a writer of bestsellers in his days, which actually lasted until the mid nineties a few years before his death at 85¹. He wrote on a variety of topics which necessitated some research. In fact a novel may take a year to write, six months of it devoted to research, six months to writing. A pleasant and satisfying way of a life, living by your wits and pen. The book under review I picked up from the remnants of my parents library, it was published in 1962 and must have been bought shortly thereafter, I have a vague memory of its physical appearance going back to my early teens. It is clearly a book meant to entertain and distract and when read discarded to make space for other books of the same kind. This is not highbrow literature, and hence tends to be underestimated and thus discarded by highbrow readers. Thus one should read it with an open mind and be on the look out for hidden merits. After all being a best selling author is not so easy, by simple combinatorics there cannot be too many of them, what are the qualities of best sellers that set them apart from others? Is it just a matter of luck? Once you get the reputation of being one it tends to be self-perpetrating, just as in politics, name recognition is almost everything.

So what does the common reader want? A page-turner obviously. What makes for turning the pages? A smooth style that does not challenge the reader slowing him or her down, and a good plot that keeps up the suspense. The first may be something that you can achieve by some natural talent and practice, the second takes some ingenuity and skill. The two are not connected, to make up a good plot is something quite different from implementing it in writing. Many of the greatest writers never came up with original plots but borrowed from others. Plot is more central to a best seller than language, the latter can always be put in shape by skilled editors, those unsung heroes of the publishing industry of the past. Nowadays I suspect that they are in short supply as they all have ambitions to be creative and strike out on their own in order to be seen. But not everyone can be famous, at least not for very long².

Innes book definitely supplies suspense. And it makes you turn the pages, The climax of it consists in a shipwreck when a boat is at the complete mercy of the furies of nature and comes to grief, the narrator surviving miraculously and conveniently. It takes skill to convey that, then it is another thing as to how realistic it is. Few people have survived

¹ Strictly speaking this is conjecture, it is not so easy to come up with statistics to buttress your arguments. Yet the NYT obituary of 1998 reveals that his novels sold 40 million copies, this makes an average of at least a million per novel, and he ought to have netted nice revenues.

² At the present rate of reproduction of say a 100 million people a year, this means three people born every second, thus everyone should be entitled to 0.3 seconds of world wide fame. For exceptional people, one in a thousand, that translates to the proverbial five minutes .

disasters, in particular few bestselling writers. But that does not matter that much because in particular few readers have as well, and there will be few to criticize from experience. Now dramatic scenes are never dramatic by themselves, they have to fit into a context, a plot, and in addition to provide distraction and entertainment they have to advance the plot. There is a plot involved. Ostensibly that of a hearing into the matter of a possible misconduct leading to the disaster (the evacuation of a military base gone awry with a lot of casualties) everything told in retrospect yet not compromising on the basic suspense. But in addition there is also a more or less realistic tale of two brothers, one the narrator and a former sailor now a struggling painter, the other his brother, a soldier long since thought lost and dead, but turning up twenty years after the war having assumed a different identity. They are united by a certain childhood fascination with a distant island set far out west from the Outer Hebrides, fictional by name of Learg, where their father was born and of which their grandfather told them stories of his life there, before it was claimed by the military. It is this island which in a sense turns out to be the main character of the novel, although I must admit not adequately developed. And here we come to what may be the real fascination of the book and perhaps also of the author, who is a Scotsman if not technically by birth at least by temperament and sympathy; namely the close-up wilderness of Scotland. With a different motivation in writing, this central fascination could have turned the book into something close to literature. In a telling scene in the book the narrator meets the commanding officer of the operation in his office. The commanding officer Standing is something of a painter himself and on the walls there are samples of what obviously must be his output in particular one landscape painting of the surroundings which attracts the attention of our protagonist. Asked what he thinks of it, he decides to give an honest answer. The brushwork is technically accomplished, but the painter (keeping up the pretense that he does not know his identity) is not at home with the subject. A best seller writer is of course technically accomplished but not at home with the subject. Innes is at home with the wilder Scotland but he does not allow this to explode the box into which he works professionally. Every writer, even bestselling ones, have it in them to produce something akin to literature if they only allow themselves. Most do not, and those who consciously try will with few exceptions flounder by the very effort. Maybe Innes is realistic, anyway he never voiced any literary ambitions in public presenting himself as basically just a story teller. Nevertheless the best part of the books are in the evocation of landscape. It is not allowed to dominate, but what there is of it is enough to make you go there and find out for yourself, which is no mean achievement of a novel. In particular the ugliness of the camp set in a barren but beautiful setting is well done and brings to you the contrast between the feeble efforts of man and the majesty of indifferent wilderness. Also the setting out on the final trip out to the island in a rubber dinghy is also evocatively done. The sand of the beach, the slow breathing of the tide, the vault of the sky, the breaking of waves, the crying of sea fowls, and above all the ever present threat of the most serene of weather turning foul. It gives a sense of presence and expectation. If the author had concentrated on this and played down the plot, which while reading may be sufficiently gripping for you to grip the pages between your fingers, appears rather contrived and anti-climactic in retrospect, it would have been quite another book, but of course a book which does not, unlike the book under review, exist in

the actual physical world and nothing you can say of it can neither be corroborated nor contradicted. But let us pause, what makes Scotland so special and so intriguing? Does not Norway have a far wilder landscape and are their inhabitants not as wild as the Scots? Indeed there is a natural geographical and even cultural connection between Norway and Scotland. In the novel the presence of Iceland and Norway looms much larger than that of France, and as far as weather is concerned far more relevant. The geography is that of the Eastern North Atlantic sitting on top of the North Sea which has other connotations. Culturally and hence politically there are ties. Shetland was into late Medieval time part of Norway, and in the novel at least there are references to Viking presence on the outer islands. The Vikings and the Celts make for the intrigue of the Scottish lands, especially the Highlands steeped into legend and mystification³. And it is all so tantalizing close to civilized England in the south. It is wilderness on its very doorsteps. Samuel Johnson and his busy body companion Boswell travelled the Hebrides in the 18th century, Norway would have been beyond them. But to get back to the book.

Plot and word painting, there is more to a novel than that. What about the development of characters? The standard criticism of second rate literature refers to the cardboard nature of the characters, mere two-dimensional cut outs, rather than well rounded ones. How many people in real life are well-rounded, and if that would be the case, how many of them do you actually experience as well-rounded? In fact to be honest we often have a closer relations to characters in novels than to many of our acquaintances. And what about the characters in highbrow novels, do they necessarily come to life? The importance of the notion of well-roundedness is exaggerated. One may roughly divide the characters in this novel into two types. The men of action, with a lot of physical courage, epitomized by the brother posing as Braddock, and the cold men of the mind relying on figures to relate to the world, it in its turn epitomized by the commander Standing, whom we are let to know is not quite at home in the situation. In fact to turn to the plot, Standing is assigned the role as commander on merely formal grounds, the understanding being that it will be Braddock who will be in charge (something Standing is bound to suspect and resent). The man of action as a hero is almost too poignantly emphasized to the point of caricature not to say ridicule. Does this reflect the moral ideology of the author? On the other hand the narrator is a painter, a hence a sissy or so, and the meteorologist Morgan is almost a hero but with figures. Incidentally one surmises that the author has done his homework thoroughly as to meteorological forecasts on the sea. Now it is all done by computers, but back in the early 60's I guess there was a lot of hand work. We are treated to our share of high and low pressures forming and moving, of isobars crowding close indicating steep gradients of pressure and violent winds and quick falls of barometric pressures. It is of course all based on a net work of weather bases, but in the ocean those are not easy to place, and our meteorologist hero, who is an ardent HAM operator in his free time also enlists the help of trawlers and other boats in the ocean to pick up additional information and getting at the edge of what is humanely possible.

And language? Much of the action and interaction is conveyed by dialogue. This often makes for a snappy style. The dialogues are kind of staccato, not to say fragmentary, in execution allowing the reader to fill in the details. It makes for an economy of writing

³ Cf. the book on Scottish Myth written by Trevor-Roper reviewed earlier in these volumes.

and the avoidance of stretches of mere transportation. At times the very ellipticity of the expressions may leave the reader in the lurch, temporarily confused and disoriented. But just as when you inhale water while swimming the best thing is just to go on, the same thing applies here. If confused, just read on, surely it will become clear, and if not, it could not have been very important in the first place. This ties up with another thing. A novel written some time ago has a purely documentary interest as well, especially so if it is not self-consciously highbrow. We can learn a lot about the mores of the time, be it merely the trivial ones. This aspect of a novel is often referred to as it being dated, meaning that it only makes sense for a special time and situation and is not a classic. This might be a drawback for the contemporary reader, but for one concerned with historical interest it adds an additional spice, if often the only spice. Because history is not concerned with the universal and timeless, but with the special and dated. The people smoke a lot. That was common in the 60's, if you did not you were not really an adult. Thus the modern reader is somewhat taken aback by the ubiquity of the cigarette, serving as well in solitary situations as in social.

And when everything is said and done. Language: Skilled. Plot: weak. Evocation: Good. Characters: Not great but not much more badly presented than what is the case even in good fiction.

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