Reviews

A Victorian monument

by Louis Greenspan

Francis West. *Gilbert Murray: A Life*. London and Canberra: Croom Helm; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984. Pp. vi, 265. £17.95.

GILBERT MURRAY WAS a classical scholar and liberal who embodied that combination of reason, moral severity and belief in progress that we associate with nineteenth-century optimism. His daughter labelled him a Victorian monument, and his friends and countrymen agreed. Born in 1866, he lived to 1957, long enough to see his liberalism repudiated by its enemies, modified by its friends and challenged by almost every school of thought that emerged in the twentieth century. Most of Murray's closest friends, Bertrand Russell and George Bernard Shaw, for example, as well as many members of his family, came to believe that revolutionary times called for something new. Some favoured socialism, others anarchism, and still others the Roman Catholic Church, but Murray remained true to the liberal creed that inspired him from his earliest youth.

Francis West's biography presents a sympathetic portrait of Murray in lucid and engaging prose. In the preface he tells us that he showed parts of the book to Arnold Toynbee, Murray's son-in-law, who endorsed it as an authentic depiction of Murray—a judgment that the reader will have no reason to challenge. There are excellent chapters on Murray's education, his marriage, his career as a scholar-activist, and his views on ancient Greece. West remains balanced. He is critical of much of Murray's Victorian narrowness and his parochialism in reading too much of modern England into classical Greece, but he admires his concept of the scholar who is relevant to his times, his tough-mindedness in dealing with Germany and fascism and his steadfastness as a liberal in dark times.

The unifying theme in West's approach to Murray is in his understanding of him as a man who has woven his various interests—schol-

arly, literary and political—into one complete design. In a century of fragmentation, when scholarship is divided and subdivided into innumerable specializations, where facts and values are disassociated from one another, when learning is separated from action, and life is lived in several unrelated compartments, Murray stood for a unity of life and thought, of scholarship and liberal activism. For Murray the key to everything was the liberal doctrine of Progress. The evolution of Greek literature was the shining model of progress; the ascetic moral code that he imposed upon himself made him an instrument of progress; his marriage, his salon and all of his thoughts were for the sake of progress.

This meant that Murray's liberalism was an all-embracing creed resembling a religion. Nowadays the term liberalism often connotes a rather good-natured spinelessness, a philosophy of infinite accommodation inspired by moral relativism. Murray's was quite different. His called for an iron asceticism and the kind of certainty about ultimate questions that one would expect from an archbishop. But can liberalism, or any political outlook, sustain such a burden? In Murray's own day there were many who saw this very rectitude as ludicrous, as a shield from reality. He was often seen as a secular monk, and one of his critics claimed that he would have been happiest as an abbot. Even those sympathetic to Murray lost faith in the possibility of sustaining such an all-embracing creed. Russell is the prime example of this. He began by seeking a synthesis wherein abstract ideas could be linked to the experiences of everyday life. But eventually he abandoned any hope of realizing such a programme. His philosophical work became technical, he never developed a view of ethics that satisfied him, and he believed that liberalism as a guide to the improvement of society was outmoded.

West is at his best in the early chapters on Murray's development as a liberal and as a scholar. The latter half of the book—on Murray's isolation, his turn to conservatism and his alarm at the rise of social democracy—is perplexing. The transformation of Murray the forward-looking radical to Murray the conservative fighting a rearguard action in protest against the development of modern mass society, is too abrupt. Part of the problem lies in the fact that no one is presented as vividly as Murray; hence the great differences between Murray and friends, the chasm that grew between him and members of his family, seems to emerge *ex nihilo*. Part is that the context, the debates about the nature of society and the social and economic crisis that stimulated these debates, has no place either in Murray's thinking or in West's account.

The chapters on Murray's youth show that the future Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford got off to a very good start. "His schooldays show no anguish of spirit and mind" (West, p. 161). His coming of age in Victorian Britain is a sunny episode in his life and leaves the reader with the impression that his attachment to Victorian ideals is an attachment to an idyllic period of life. Certainly there was none of the agony that we find in Russell's memoir of Pembroke Lodge, nor did his experience at school provoke any of the bitterness that we find in works such as Orwell's *Such, Such Were the Joys*. We would not know from Murray's early life that Victorianism is sometimes thought to be synonymous with repression.

West describes Murray's education as a triumphant ascent which began in the wilds of New South Wales and culminated in the prestigious professorship at Oxford. Liberalism and classical scholarship were closely intertwined in his mind. He acquired the rudiments of liberalism as a boy in New South Wales from his father, who was an Irish Whig landowner and local parliamentarian. His father's first principles were liberty, sympathy for the underdog and a readiness to use force in defence of vital interests. The instruction that began at home continued in Merchant Taylor's Public School in England where Murray adopted Sir Francis Storr's liberal teaching emphasizing the moral duty of man. Here he was confirmed in his agnosticism but was recompensed in the moral doctrine of John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism, which "enabled a man to judge rightly in practice on every moral and political question" (West, p. 15). He was an outstanding success as a scholar, and his companionship was sought by students and tutors. The triumph continued at Oxford where he came to be known as one of the leading young Liberal scholars of his generation. He was befriended by Lady Carlisle, mistress of one of the great Whig families of England, married her daughter and achieved the chair of classics at Glasgow at the age of twenty-three.

Murray aspired after and achieved success beyond the walls of academe. He did not want to be a classical scholar cloistered in a university with fellow specialists. West emphasizes that for Murray the mission of the British classical scholar went beyond philology and textual analysis. He wanted to help make the classical authors, Aeschylus and Euripides, as much a part of the cultural life of England as were Wordsworth and Shakespeare. After several years at Glasgow he left university for nine years to become a playwright and translator of Greek tragedy. His translations were so successful that they were performed on the British stage. George Bernard Shaw hailed him as the man who had brought ancient Greece to modern England, and Bertrand Russell

was so moved by a reading that Murray gave of his translation of Euripides' *Hyppolitus* that he sought out Murray as a mentor and friend.

The perplexity begins in West's chapter on World War I. Murray, like many other liberals, was driven into political activism by the war. Murray became a prominent supporter of the government and the war effort, and West endeavours to show that Murray's views of Germany's aggressive designs are supported by current research. This may be so, but the breach that had grown between Murray and others, Russell for example, was deeper than a disagreement over German war aims. There is an important dimension missing in West's discussion. The war was as profoundly shocking for many liberals in 1914 as the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact would be for many Marxists in 1939. There was a deep sense of betrayal, a conviction that the Europe that allowed itself such a demonic slaughter of a generation of its sons was a sick civilization—one which needed a social and even spiritual renewal. West skirts over this, and so we are puzzled when we come to the touching account of his isolation from his friends who had become radicals, his children who had become engulfed in the disillusionment and hedonism of the lost generation, and his wife who elected to join the Labour Party and work for "the nameless people who matter".

Murray's chief activities between the wars were his work for the League of Nations and his scholarship (though his wife believed that he did not give the latter the attention that it deserved). At the League of Nations he was sometimes bizarre and sometimes statesmanlike. His belief that Britain alone was free of the narrow self-interest that dominated the policies of other nations belongs to the bizarre, and it is fortunate that he reserved this conviction for private correspondence. He was statesmanlike in urging that Germany be brought into the family of nations soon after World War I, and later in urging that fascism be countered by a collective show of strength. But again we are faced with the unexplained, when we learn that the growing strength of the Labour Party and the welfare state seems to have been his greatest fear. Early on he warned friends of the Bolshevik tendencies of the party, he denounced those who believed in the reconstruction of British society after World War II and finally in 1945—following at least a decade of gulags and concentration camps—Murray confided to a friend that he began to lose hope for the human race only after Clement Attlee came to power.

What accounts for this utter lack of proportion? Did Murray have any sort of economic or social philosophy? Perhaps the best explanation at hand is in Toynbee's description of Murray's generation of aristocratic liberals who feared democracy and who believed that "to take advantage of one's strength was a vile misuse of it ... but it was hardly in the picture that the weak should work for the same purpose on their own account."[1] Whatever the explanation, something momentous in Britain's history passes without comment. A leading liberal does not deem it necessary to comment or offer any solution to the economic and social crisis that millions experienced in the period between the wars.

If the later chapters do not explain Murray the man they do contain one of the most valuable sections in the book, a discussion of Murray's views of the relevance of ancient Greek literature to a liberal theory of progress. He wanted to integrate the two. Since the Greeks held many views quite antithetical to any modern concept of progress, Murray's task was formidable, at least as formidable as the mediaeval efforts to merge faith and reason. What emerges is, in my view, a fascinating mixture of liberalism becoming Greek pessimism.

Frank Turner's monumental study of ancient Greece and the Victorians presents the history of classical scholarship in Victorian Britain as a political enterprise in which scholars from various political persuasions portray ancient Greek authors in their own image. Thus there was a Tory Greece and a Whig Greece, a Tory Plato and a Whig Plato. Murray was well within this tradition, consciously commenting on ancient Athens as though it were experiencing the problems of contemporary England. West takes Murray to task for this, showing where it led to distortions, but praises Murray for seeking a scholarship that was relevant to his own times. The debate on whether the scholar is a neutral fact-gatherer or a myth-maker for his times is still lively and important, and Murray would have been alarmed if he could have known that the heirs to his views would be Marxists.

Few scholars have ever been as persuasive to their contemporaries as Murray was to his. Before World War I Murray's presentation of Euripides as a playwright who addressed Victorian Britain captured the imagination of many people. He portrayed Euripides as a rationalist who hated cruelty, superstition and dogma, translating his plays for the British stage through which Murray himself became a celebrity in the world of letters. After the war he became less persuasive, though he remained very popular. He turned his attention to Aeschylus and the meaning of tragedy. In Aeschylus he found ideas that spoke to the disillusionment and despair of the post-war generation. The Oresteian trilogy was, in his view, a drama of violence, guilt and the pardoning of guilt which spoke directly to a world that had been ravaged by war.

[1] Jean Smith and Arnold Toynbee, eds., *Gilbert Murray: An Unfinished Autobiography* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1960), p. 215.

Tragedy and tragic catharsis, he believed, could reinstate confidence in progress. In these views he was inching close to a theological doctrine of grace.

Murray's concept of progress itself is treated sympathetically by West but does not seem to me very persuasive. It is confusing and, when not confusing, too other-worldly for a political creed. To his credit he wanted to get away from a concept of progress which held that tomorrow is automatically better than yesterday. For him progress was not automatic. In his view the only important model of progress was the development of Greek culture, and this development was arrested by superstition, violence and failure of nerve. Murray was one of the first classical scholars to turn to anthropology as a source of insight into Greek literature. He was especially persuaded by the work of Jane Harrison, which demonstrated that Greek tragedy had emerged from "primitive" rituals. This provided him with the model of progress as civilization conquering darkness, the higher conquering the lower. This view of progress was dualistic, almost Manichaean. Shiny progress, as West puts it, is always beset by dark barbarism. Progress was associated with loftiness of sentiment and expression, moral and aesthetic perfection.

But progress in Murray's hands became so spiritualized and hellenized that it lost any intelligible connection with history as it was unfolding in the twentieth century. As ever, he was a dualist seeing the world as a constant struggle between hellenism and barbarism. Barbarism was defined so loosely that in the course of time it could be employed to mean anything that Murray disliked—including religion, fascism, Clement Attlee, Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and modernist literature. Secondly, in equating progress with spiritual ascent in the way that he did, he severed the hope for progress from the aspirations of millions of people for a better life.

The belief in progress as it is commonly held is a conviction that the accumulation of scientific knowledge will be accompanied by a steady improvement in the material and moral condition of mankind. Russell and others were shocked into the realization that the growth of scientific knowledge was not leading in this direction: that new demons, new barbarisms were the result of progress, not its antithesis. Murray, rather than face this possibility, preferred to adopt the role of liberal *qua* Greek sage aloof from the trials and burdens of the flesh.

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