

REAPPRAISING GILBERT MURRAY

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Christopher Stray, ed. *Gilbert Murray Reassessed: Hellenism, Theatre, and International Politics*. Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2007. Pp. xii, 400. £65; £27.50 (pb). Cdn. \$156 (hb). US\$55 (pb). ISBN 978-0-19-920879-1 (hb).

For much of the first half of the twentieth century Gilbert Murray was a leading figure in British academia, in British theatre, on the British and American lecture circuits and even in British politics. He was admired by the community of scholars as Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, the most prestigious position in classical scholarship in the English-speaking world. He was also esteemed by a wider reading public as the champion of a magisterial liberalism rooted in classical Greek culture. Finally he was respected by the world at large as a liberal activist who, during World War I, wrote well-argued pamphlets in support of the war and who later became co-chairman of the League of Nations Union, an organization that in the '20s and '30s attracted 400,000 members. Among his companions were George Bernard Shaw and Bertrand Russell, both of whom remained his friends for life. As chief editor of the Home University Library he commissioned Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy*, which is still unsurpassed as an introduction to this subject.

Today he is forgotten. Younger classical scholars would endorse the statement by Fowler (quoted in this volume): "in spite of his great fame when he was alive, he might never have written, so far as most scholars are concerned today" (p. 58). His role as the public intellectual who connected modern liberalism with Hellenism has been taken over by the followers of Leo Strauss who view this connection rather differently than Murray did. As for his liberal activism, when he died in 1957 Murray was regarded affectionately as a noble ghost of Victorian liberalism past, whose passionate advocacy of the League of Nations was seen as well meaning and futile as the organization he had championed. In the '60s and '70s his words and deeds were swept away in the tides of anti-liberal fervour that inspired the newly emerging leftist revolutionaries and neo-conservatives.

At first perusal *Gilbert Murray Reassessed* has the format of festschrifts and other scholarly reviews of the accomplishments of a particular writer. There are articles on every aspect of Murray's activities: his translations of Greek drama, his critical editions of Euripides, his views of Hellenism, his post-World War I

internationalism and even his lectures on the BBC, all by specialists in these topics. But this volume is more than a summing up of Murray's contributions to scholarship. The aim of the volume is to revive Murray the public intellectual, a voice of liberalism that deserves a new hearing. The book could have been entitled *Gilbert Murray Retrieved for Our Times*: a contribution to the struggle to find a liberalism that addresses the anti-liberal, anti-intellectual forces that threaten us today. In this spirit the volume is dedicated to those who died in the London terrorist attack of July 2005.

The volume opens with two sets of memoirs, one by Murray's grandchildren Ann Pauladan and Alexander Murray, the other Francis West's account of Murray's reflections on an Australian childhood. The memoirs of his grandchildren, affectionate and charming, seem less interested in refashioning Gilbert Murray for our time. They still portray Murray as one who inhabited a world that is no more, the proponent of a liberalism that was naively optimistic and top heavy with reason at the expense of the emotions. Murray's optimism is evident in their anecdote about an encounter between Murray and Sir Edward Grey, during a summer walk in 1914. Murray opened the conversation by scoffing at rumours of impending war in Europe, for him impossible between civilized powers. Grey closed it by assuring him that war was certain, thus causing the speechless and horrified Murray to rush home. As for the supremacy of bloodless reason, Murray's offspring reveal that he was so tone deaf to music that when he heard a Beethoven quartet on the radio he remarked that he couldn't understand how Americans could dance to this noise.

The work of addressing Murray's contemporary standing begins with the essay "Gilbert Murray on Greek Literature: the Great/Greek Man's Burden" by Mark Griffith. Griffith's article is the most ambitious of those that argue for Murray's relevance for our time. As a classical scholar himself Griffith agrees with his colleagues that Murray's translations and critical analyses of texts have long been surpassed. But he insists that these shortcomings should not blind us to the contribution that Murray made in bringing classical literature out of the closet of academic classical scholarship. He praises Murray as one who audaciously drew on the social sciences, thus making the study of the Greek authors interdisciplinary and relevant to his own time. Griffith writes:

[W]hile Murray's ideas about the Greeks were not particularly original and distinctive in their main outlines, the ways in which he adopted and adapted the bold new ideas of others (most notably, Jane Harrison, and James Frazer; and, less directly and consciously, Friedrich Nietzsche), and the manner in which he presented these ideas to a general cultured public, were extraordinarily appropriate to a particular mentality and socio-political order. (P. 59)

The "bold ideas" that Griffith is referring to as Murray's have come to be known as the ritual theory of Greek drama, a theory which held that Greek

drama was rooted in religious ritual dramas of the tensions between the world and the underworld, tensions that continued to penetrate the moral universe of the best Greek authors. In doing so Murray demonstrated that Greek rationalism was not simply an assertion of an abstract rationalism that simply rejected superstition and the irrational from on high. Rather, Greek rationalism at its best, that is, as exemplified in authors such as Aeschylus and Euripides, entered into the demonic forces of Greek civilization sympathetically, transforming and elevating them. In revising the view of Murray as a lifeless, Olympian rationalist, Griffith brings him into the orbit of Nietzsche and those influenced by him today such as Renée Girard, who argue that irrational and destructive forces do not enter religion from the outside but are part of their inner reality.

Griffith argues further that Murray's achievement was not merely a triumph of academic interpretation but opens the door to *praxis*, to a liberalism that can confront the irrational because

... at a moment when socioeconomic-political movements (e.g. of Marxism and Socialism) and the psychological-linguistic anthropological theories (of e.g. Freud, De Saussure, Jakobson, and Durkheim) were mounting major challenges to the secular liberal-humanism of the English upper-class establishment ..., Murray's "simplicistic" theory succeeded brilliantly ... in neutralizing or modifying many of those critical approaches that were most threatening to the humanistic enterprise in general...

(P. 74)

Presumably he is proposing that in confronting the irrational in the form of religious fanaticisms, anti-rational philosophies and aesthetic cults today, we are best served by an approach that is inspired by Murray's programme of engaging and transforming them.

The authors are united in rescuing Murray from the caricature of a Victorian Don Quixote fighting the battles of yesteryear, but many argue that his liberalism is seriously flawed as a guide to our perplexities. Indeed they suggest to me that Murray's shortcomings may be more instructive for us than his principles, for in an age when we face a surge of religious and other democratic movements that reject liberalism, Murray represents a liberalism that was prepared to reject democracy.

Martin Ceadel comes to Murray as an historian of liberalism rather than of classical literature. While he agrees with Griffith that Murray was much more than a relic of a social order that died in 1914, his essay "Gilbert Murray and International Politics" concludes that Murray's liberalism was still not able to cope with the emerging forces of the twentieth century. Ceadel's essay carefully traces the development of Murray's liberalism from childhood through the First World War and beyond. He demonstrates that Murray's mature liberalism, though rooted in ideology, can be understood as responses to experience. For example, his firm teetotalism was a response to his struggle with his father's

destructive alcoholism. Murray's mature liberalism which took shape during and after the First World War was far from quixotic. He settled into what we nowadays call a centrist liberal hawk. At the beginning of that war he situated himself between the radicalism and pacifism of Hobson and Russell and the war-mongering of Churchill, never joining the messianic trumpeting of a war to end all wars that is associated with H. G. Wells. His view was practical and rooted in the perspectives of balance of power. In the course of the war his views developed further. As he came to see the dangers of jingoistic nationalism that the war had given rise to, he became a defender of pacifists (at one point intervening to save several from possible execution, and at another intervening to save Russell from excessively punitive prison conditions). The experience of war, which had inflamed the fury of nationalism, might, he feared, lead to the failure to establish an international order to restrain the competing nationalisms. This failure, he argued, undid Hellenic civilization. Thus, Ceadel shows, he was able to take a leading role in promoting the League of Nations and became co-chairman of the League of Nations Union, promoting world peace with the same pragmatism that he promoted war. For Murray the League stood for a sober policy of collective security rather than the utopian policy of making love not war. He even co-opted Churchill for its executive. Throughout he remained a centrist. If at the beginning of the first war he manoeuvred between Russell's pacifism and Lloyd George's jingoism, before World War II he was manoeuvring between pacifists, pro-Germans, and ultra-realists like E. H. Carr who believed in power without liberalism.

But Ceadel suggests that by the end of World War II the ideology of an aristocratic liberalism took precedence over realism. Murray feared the rise of the Asian and African third-world alliances. His Hellenism, it seems, focused on the West; it was what we call today Eurocentric. He warned that as the former colonies gained independence and became the majority in the United Nations, there was a "real danger that not merely the British Empire but the whole 'Western' ... civilization will become of less and less account" (p. 237). Ceadel concludes that, in reverting to a liberalism that eschewed democracy, Murray's attempt to go beyond the liberalism of the Victorian era was not up to the challenge of post-World War II. While Murray remained attentive to events, "sadly, his liberalism, which for virtually all his adult life had guided his intelligent and energetic engagement with international politics, did not quite do the same" (p. 237).

Although the memory of Murray may have gone off the radar of most educated readers, he is no doubt well known to readers of this journal because of his life-long relationship to Bertrand Russell. (We are told that soon an edition of his correspondence with Russell will appear.) This relationship brings Murray into a rather clear focus. William Bruneau, editor of the forthcoming volume of the Murray–Russell correspondence, traces their relationship through its various

phases in “Gilbert Murray, Bertrand Russell, and the Theory and Practice of Politics”. In the early years of their relationship Murray was well known for his achievements as a literary Hellenist, while Russell was rather less well known as an author of *Principia Mathematica*. Bruneau maintains that, though they admired each other’s achievements in their respective fields, their deepest bond was as public intellectuals who continued to champion the liberalism of John Stuart Mill and other founding giants and philosophy. According to Bruneau, this meant they were bound by two fundamentals. Both were liberals formed in the schools of Voltaire and Mill. This meant, according to Bruneau, first, “As life-long agnostics, as respecters of individual rights, and as writers of prose, that [they] would appeal broadly to general readers and scholars alike” (p. 203), and second, that “they agreed philosophically” about the relation of politics and instinct and the dangers of the almighty state. Both publicly acknowledged this bond. Russell certainly often strayed into radicalism and pacifism, but Victorian liberalism was his and Murray’s *ritornello*.

Their differences, however, were striking. They opposed each other’s positions on World War I and Russell remained sceptical about the League of Nations. One of the striking differences Bruneau highlights, and so far as I know is the first to do so, is Murray’s more cautious empiricism versus Russell’s readiness for speculative flights, a very welcome insight about which much more can be said.

More might have been said as well about the crucial difference in their relationship to democracy. Russell, too, was an aristocrat, but he devoted much of his political writing to schemes to perfect democracy, schemes that were suggested to him by guild socialism, anarchism and various educational experiments. Murray, however became disillusioned: “I am a good deal more disgusted than you are with the excesses of democracy”; “I do regret the change from a liberalism which aimed at enlightenment and justice to a Labour movement that aims at the welfare of one (admittedly very large) class”, adding “many great religions are likely to be re-barbarised and there is a real danger that the Moslem world may unite against the West” (p. 216).
