

The Publisher's Reader *Extraordinaire*

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Helen Smith, *An Uncommon Reader: A Life of Edward Garnett, Mentor and Editor of Literary Genius*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 448pp., \$35 cloth

WITH THIS MAJOR BIOGRAPHY of Edward Garnett (1868-1937), publisher's reader extraordinaire, Helen Smith, a young British academic, has done readers and scholars of modernist literature a great service. Garnett is one of those names that pops up in almost every book about the moderns—Conrad, Joyce, Lawrence, Forster, Ford Madox Ford, et. al.—but is never dwelled on for long. While many students of the period will have heard of him and have some vague idea of the role he played, they won't quite know what it is he did, because of the myriad ways in which the literary world has changed. What, after all, is a publisher's reader? Nowadays they tend to be mere gatekeepers, recent college graduates working for a pittance, who thanklessly read, or at least skim, the company's slush pile. In Garnett's

era they could—and some did—define their own roles. When he started out in the 1890s, there were no literary agents and no editors in the modern sense of the word. He became not only the discoverer of talent, occasionally of genius, but also its ally and, eventually, the midwife to its masterpieces; reading his story is like discovering the missing link that connected these disparate moderns. Garnett, wrote E.M. Forster, “occupies a unique position in the literary history of our age. He has done more than any living writer to discover and encourage the genius of other writers, and he has done it without any desire for personal prestige.”

A friend of Garnett's attempted to describe his method. “Garnett has been called the ‘discoverer’ of genius. He was more than that. He often evoked it, inspired it and moulded it in its early stages.” His career spanned fifty years, could be overwhelming in its demands—at one point he was reporting on some seven hundred manuscripts a year—and was far from remunerative. But the joyful moment of discovery, described below by Garnett himself, never waned; he exulted in

the keen shock of pleasure, the delighted flash of recognition, when, amid the mass of trivial, indifferent, or heavily conscientious efforts he lights once and awhile on a beginner's work showing that instinctive creative originality which we call genius. What hereafter may be fated in the development of this genius, to what point it may arrive or may never arrive, all this is hidden from him—it is enough for the discoverer in that happy moment to see there in the piece of work an individual talent bringing its special revelations, a talent which he knows cannot be reduplicated, however endless the chain of talents the world has in store.

Like so many major cultural figures of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Garnett did not have the “benefit” of an MFA degree or even an undergraduate education. But he came from a line of book people: his grandfather was the Assistant Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum; his father, Richard, became Superintendent of the British Museum Reading Room (now the British Library), and later its Keeper of Printed Books. Among his parents’ friends, as Edward was growing up, were George Meredith, Coventry Patmore, Samuel Butler, and the Pre-Raphaelite painter Ford Madox Brown; the latter’s grandson, Ford Madox Hueffer, was a childhood playmate of Edward’s and later a notable modernist author under his pen name of Ford Madox Ford. Edward attended the City of London School, and upon leaving school entered the office of the publisher T. Fisher Unwin as a packer of books. He was clumsy and inept in this physical labor, and thus became reader for the firm by default.

In the course of his career Garnett would work for several publishers—later employers included Heinemann, Duckworth, and, most notably, Jonathan Cape—and the distinction he brought to their lists was legendary. But he was always more the writer’s man than the publisher’s. “Garnett

had not the slightest doubt where his allegiance lay: literature always came first, his employer a very distant second.” He had no compunction about advising a favorite author to go elsewhere if his own employer wasn’t offering a sweet enough deal; the multiple conflicts of interest inherent in his working method would be unacceptable in modern corporate culture. But none of this was important to Garnett. He wasn’t exactly an unworldly man, for he could be very shrewd indeed, but he was essentially uninterested in money, even slightly scornful of material success.

Garnett’s first discovery—“mentee” is probably how he would be described in today’s inelegant jargon—was a Polish ship’s mate, 37 years old and unpublished, named Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, who spoke English only as a third language. In 1894 he submitted a manuscript to Unwin’s “Pseudonym Library,” an imprint devised by the then-twenty-six-year-old Garnett, and on the strength of the talent Garnett divined in this work, which would eventually be named *Almayer’s Folly*, Garnett persuaded him to give up his seafaring life and devote himself to a career in literature. The rest is history: Korzeniowski changed his name to Joseph Conrad and became one of the pillars of literary modernism.

It probably would not have happened without Garnett’s help—“collaboration” might be a better word—which lasted from his first meeting with Conrad until Conrad’s fourth book, *Heart of Darkness*, when the author no longer needed the ministrations of his literary mentor. “The two men were not unlike temperamentally,” writes Smith, “sharing a skeptical turn of mind, an underlying strain of melancholy and a bleak view of man’s materialist tendencies... [Garnett’s] dealings with Conrad involved a delicate balancing act: one wrong word, one hasty criticism could shatter his friend’s ever fragile confidence and cause him to

abandon *An Outcast of the Islands* and possibly a literary career altogether.” Garnett made profuse and minutely detailed notes on everything Conrad wrote at this early period. Garnett especially admired what he called Conrad’s “scenic” method, his knack of creating a visual and sensual idea in the reader’s head; it was a technique he would recommend again and again to later protégés. His Preface to Conrad’s 1897 novella *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* is, as Smith points out, “now regarded as a key document of literary modernism.”

It is not surprising, perhaps, that Garnett’s first major author—first major “cause,” as it were—hailed from the Continent. From his earliest years Garnett deplored the insularity and what he saw as the anti-intellectualism of British authors and the British reading public—their philistinism, in fact. Fiction, he perceived, was in England still not accorded the intellectual respect it had long received on the Continent. As late as 1899, a whole century after Jane Austen’s impassioned defense of the novel in *Northanger Abbey*, he was penning his own:

Many men of letters to-day look on the novel as a mere story-book, as a series of light-coloured, amusing pictures for their ‘idle hours,’ and on memoirs, biographies, histories, criticism and poetry as the age’s serious contribution to literature. Whereas the reverse is the case. The most serious and significant of all literary forms the modern world has evolved is the novel; and brought to its highest development, the novel shares with poetry to-day the honour of being the supreme instrument of the great artist’s literary skill.

Garnett’s own literary idol was Turgenev, and one of the things he most admired in Conrad was his perceived “Slavic” nature (an idea that Conrad, violently anti-Russian, rejected for political reasons). “It is time someone should estimate for us what the Russians have done in literature, should

show clearly how they have successfully widened the whole scope and aim of the novel,” Garnett insisted.

Garnett had a unique (in the true sense of the word) perspective on Russian literature at this cultural moment because his wife, the redoubtable Constance Garnett, was in the process of translating the great Russians, most of whom had never been translated directly into English before but only via French or German. Constance was as remarkable in her way as Edward. A Fabian socialist who had studied at Cambridge and taught Classics there, at Newnham College, she married Edward when she was twenty-seven and he a mere twenty-one. “If it were true that [Edward] would never be self-supporting,” she wrote to a friend, “obviously somebody would have to look after him, & so why not I?” It turned out to be, to say the least of it, an unconventional partnership. In the early years of their marriage Edward and Constance befriended a group of Russian revolutionary exiles who had settled in London; one of them, Sergei Stepniak, became especially close to the family, and Constance fell deeply in love with him, though Smith has not been able to establish the extent of their relations. These revolutionaries suggested that Constance learn Russian to while away the boring months of her pregnancy in 1892, and her progress was rapid; that same year, not long after the birth of the couple’s only child, David Garnett, she was already beginning literary translations, and two years later, with Tolstoy and Turgenev, her standard translations of the Russian classics began to appear in print. The Garnetts, then, were intimately involved in Russian literature, a fact that would have a tremendous effect on Edward Garnett’s aesthetic and, through his mentorship of chosen authors and his forceful critical prose—Arnold Bennett, for one, said that Edward wrote some of the best criticism of fiction that he had ever

read—on the aesthetic of educated readers of that time. John Middleton Murry called Garnett the “most single-minded, the most austere devoted, and the most influential critic of modern English literature.”

twenty-six-year-old schoolteacher who was struggling with an unwieldy novel about his early years as the son of a coal miner and a possessive, aspiring mother. “Ford Madox Hueffer discovered I was a genius,” wrote

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Garnett believed that “the English were essentially antipathetic to fine writing,” and initially he disliked the work of the very English John Galsworthy, calling him “a good Briton” who “sees things through the eyes of a Clubman who carries England with him wherever he goes.” Through Conrad’s pressure, however, Garnett came to revise this view and eventually became a champion of Galsworthy’s work, and a friend. The two were the mainstays of weekly luncheons at a cheap restaurant called the Mont Blanc; other attendees included Hilaire Belloc, W.H. Hudson, Stephen Reynolds, Norman Douglas, and Edward Thomas, the brilliant poet whose career Garnett championed until his death in World War I. Another new writer whose cause he espoused was E.M. Forster, whose first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, had powerfully impressed him. Garnett, a grateful Forster recalled, “picked up a book by an unknown writer, which, in his opinion, was promising...forced an enthusiastic review into a magazine, and so gave me a chance of reaching a public.”

Garnett had long been searching for a new genius to arise from the working class, someone who would bring the immediacy of working men and women’s lives to the English reading public. Then, in 1911, Ford Madox Ford recommended to him a

the young D.H. Lawrence to a friend, “...published me some verse and a story or two, sent me to Wm Heinemann with the *White Peacock*, and left me to paddle my own canoe. I very nearly wrecked it and did for myself. Edward Garnett, like a good angel, fished me out.” The two men immediately became close. Garnett was there when Lawrence became ill with pneumonia, and when his teaching career ended with the breakdown of his health; there when he broke with his restrictive fiancée, Louise Burrows; there when he began the scandalous relationship with Frieda Weekley that would sever him from conventional society. (The Garnett home, Lawrence claimed, was the only place in England where he and Frieda were welcome.) And it was Garnett who, along with Lawrence, wrestled mightily with the manuscript that eventually became the great novel *Sons and Lovers*. “From the scraps of Edward’s comments that remain and from the parts of the manuscript that Lawrence incorporated into what became *Sons and Lovers*,” Smith writes, “it seems that he revised with Edward’s notes at his elbow and his words ringing in his ears.” Eventually Garnett took on the task of editing the novel, cutting its bulk by ten percent. Some later scholars have objected to Garnett’s cuts, and in 1992 Cambridge

University Press published a text restoring them, but Lawrence's own letters to Garnett at the time are convincing proof that he approved what Garnett did, and appreciated his taking on this onerous task when Lawrence himself was eager to get on with more interesting new projects. His dedication of *Sons and Lovers* is eloquent: "To my friend and protector in love and literature Edward Garnett from the author."

As Lawrence's friends noted, he all too quickly grew to relish the role of genius in which Garnett had cast him. He turned his back on the style and technique he had so brilliantly achieved in his breakthrough novel: "I shan't write in the same manner as *Sons and Lovers* again, I think: in that hard, violent style full of sensation and presentation." He was already deeply involved in *The Sisters*, an early version of what would eventually become *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, and rejected Edward's aesthetic doubts about Lawrence's new methods—his habit of making theoretical abstractions at the expense of vivid episodes, for instance. "[W]hen Edward read a sentence such as 'He still had power over her: he was still Man to her,' he considered it belonged in the pages of a popular weekly magazine and condemned it as 'common.'" Lawrence was irritated by this kind of judgment, but his fiction came to encompass more and more of such excesses, and when all is said and done, can we really doubt that *Sons and Lovers* is Lawrence's best book? Garnett identified several conflicting elements in Lawrence's personality, "the poet, the artist, the preacher, the teacher and the *gamin*"; when the teacher and the preacher took over, Garnett felt, the fiction was in trouble. Nevertheless, he later defended *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a book he disliked, against the censors.

During World War I the middle-aged Garnett served as an orderly in an ambulance unit and, later, in the Ministry

of Fisheries. He joined the new firm of Jonathan Cape in 1921. Cape's "greatest gift," Garnett claimed, "was that he knew nothing about books and admitted it. He looked around him for the best reader he could find, chose me, and followed me blind." At Cape, Garnett cultivated new generations of literary stylists, including T.E. Lawrence, Liam O'Flaherty, Naomi Mitchison, Dorothy Richardson, H.E. Bates, Sean O'Faolain, and Henry Green. His struggles with the manuscript of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in its various versions were even more epic than his efforts with *Sons and Lovers*, and T.E. Lawrence would dedicate his next book, *The Mint*, to him. Henry Green (1905-73), one of the youngest writers Garnett would mentor, left a memorable description of what it was like for a neophyte author to have the benefit of Garnett's aid:

He began with the most delicious praise. He had not only read your work, the stuttering work, but he had seen in it more, far more, than in your dreams you had dared to claim. Better still he had an intense curiosity about you, which is perhaps of even greater importance to young writers.... Like a St. Bernard he could smell out the half-frozen body which, if encouraged, might yet be able to wrestle with words. The bottle of brandy round his beck was flattery, and at the next meeting with him it was blame. Afterwards he bullied you with a mixture of blame-flattery, nearly always to your good.

It probably goes without saying that Garnett was not entirely content in his role of handmaid to art; he, too, aspired to be a creator. In this he was to be disappointed again and again: he failed in fiction, in drama, in poetry. To close friends, he sometimes expressed his depression at "the second-hand sort of existence that is implied" in the work he did. Yet some felt that it was his high standards and expectations, his very qualities as an editor and critic, that kept him from achieving his

artistic goals. Of his literary powers, Edward Thomas wrote: “You have to see & hear him to know them & I am convinced he can never write anything worthy of them.”

Garnett died in 1937, aged 69, of a cerebral hemorrhage. He and Constance had been living separately for many years; he had set up a London establishment with Nellie Heath, an artist and longtime family friend. The Garnetts’ son David—nicknamed Bunny—had (perhaps to his father’s secret chagrin!) achieved instant literary success with an early novel, *Lady Into Fox*, and went on to have a prolific writing career, gaining notoriety as one of the more sexually fluid members of the Bloomsbury Group. Edward’s first “genius,” Conrad, had preceded him to the grave in 1924, telling him near the end that “the belief in the absolute unflawed honesty of your judgment has been one of the mainstays of my literary life.”

More recent geniuses concurred. “I loved your father,” Henry Green told David Garnett. “I owe far more to him than to anyone else. He had an attitude towards novels and how to write them, from which stems almost any original idea that I have gained.”

Helen Smith has served her subject very well. It would be interesting, now that he has been so well “biographized” (there is also a 1982 biography by George Jefferson, as well as a group study by Carolyn Heilbrun, *The Garnett Family*), for a mainstream critic to take measure of just how great Garnett’s influence on modern letters was. His almost forceful imposition of a Continental aesthetic on the insular British literary world in the decades before the First World War had a tremendous effect on the direction taken by British fiction, certainly more than the casual reader can understand. a