A Riotous Artist

Henry Williamson

The Second Burst, by Sir Alfred Munnings, K.C.V.O., LL.D. (Museum Press, 25s).

Perhaps this *critique* of a most exuberant book, reflecting everywhere its author's yea-saying attitude to life, should not begin with an anecdote which is not in his own story; but here goes. The scene is beside a river in North Norfolk, a shallow where farm-horses go down to drink; across the water the Old hall built by Nicolas Bacon, Chancellor to Queen Elizabeth and father of Francis; down-stream are meadows, woods, and south of them chalky loam, sloping fields rising to the skyline.

The time is summer, 1938, more particularly towards the end of a farming day. A painter, grey felt hat cocked over one eye, is painting at an easel. His canvas is a large piece of millboard which, an hour or two back he has scrounged from the flint building built out, in the sixteenth century, from the farmyards and stables. We called it the Granary. At the time it was a furniture repository; for a year before we had come up from Devon, and, not having a farmhouse, most of our books and extra bits were stored there.

Alfred Munnings, having come to visit me, cried suddenly, 'Look at that sky! Look at the water! Look at those woods!' He stood, head on one side, possessed by the colours. Then, without a word, he left me, to start painting. Delighted with his youthful enthusiasm, I went away, his presence being to me, in those troublous days of reclaiming derelict acres and trying to alter the outlook of long-neglected labourers, like oxygen. I went up to my fields, seeing from the pine-wood above the chalk quarry the small figure intent on its work below.

No female giving birth likes to be watched; no creative artist can feel but dread, or anxiety, however subdued, when his unfinished work is exposed to the general (in the sense of Keats's phrase). My young son, coming down the hill later that afternoon, found what to him was a stranger painting by his father's open granary door. As the stranger did not move the boy approached and looked over his shoulder. *'Go away, boy!'* cried the painter, 'Be off, Don't look at what I'm doing!'

'I'm not,' replied the twelve-year-old. 'I'm looking at at my father's trouser-press board that you've pinched!'

I of course, was delighted that A.J., flushed like a chameleon in the 'form' and colour around him, had taken the first likely 'canvas' he could find to fix his impressions. Somewhere in the Castle House at Dedham, on the borders of Suffolk and Essex, that river-scene is perhaps now lying, though the trousers that once it helped to crease are long since worn out, their old material having, in the course of time and work on that Norfolk farm, been used by a thrifty mother for garments for small boys.

I have known Sir Alfred Munnings for very nearly a quarter of a century: a generous enthusiastic and stimulating personality, who speaks his mind truly, and one, therefore, with whom you know exactly where you are. Limitations! What man isn't limited? I recall A.J. becoming angry about the work of D.H. Lawrence, by which he probably meant *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which isn't Lawrence at his best, or well-being; let him read *Kangaroo*, or *Aaron's Rod* for the Italian scenes and characters, or *Sea and Sardinia*, for example, for there in words is the equivalent of what was in the form and colour of the Norfolk riverside scene that afternoon in the summer of 1938.

I said the artist was chameleonic. This review roams and rambles, in the manner of the book I have been reading for the past two days and nights. Is it literature? Don't ask me: I recall Arnold Bennett's advice to the young writer many years ago – 'Take Literature and wring its neck.' I know only that Munning's book bursts with life, with exuberant scenes, with interesting facts, people, names, details of a life gone past. There are no scandals; why should there be? Munnings is so shocked with life, in the sense of an artist being startled and exhilarated by the fact of the wonderful things in his world to be seen and enjoyed, that he, unlike a stagnant or too-introspective man, has no grudges. If he boils up, like steam it blows over.

What does he boil up about? Sham artists, of which many abound; cruelty to horses (his description of a bull-fight is particularly English in its outlook) and bad sportsmen in the hunting field. Look at this account of a meet somewhere in East Anglia. It was a Cads' Hunt if ever there was one: period 1920, and the redistribution of wealth since the war.

We were in a large woodland country at the time. A smart secretary – with an eyebrow moustache and a big flask on his saddle, wearing a velvet cap, a bunch of violets in his buttonhole, a white stock set off with a gold fox-head pin, flesh-coloured tops to his boots, on not a bad sort of horse – was riding off, carrying the fox in a bag. Standing around on the stubble between the woods were the field: rich potentates and their spouses from Ipswich, a few farmers, a sprinkling of cavalry officers from the barracks, some in Moss Bros. costume. If the costumes weren't from Moss Bros. the scene remains the same.

As the secretary rode off with the fox there was a burst of shouting, a cracking of whips – hounds had broken away from the huntsman ... Two of the leading hounds seized the sack! More shouts and cracking of whips... the fox and the sack were rescued, and the smiling secretary bore his burden across the stubble round the corner of a wood... Silence ... After a while the huntsman took his hounds and laid them on again on the far side of the wood... Soon we saw a small, distant, red object coming back to us ... the fox, making for the earth from which he had been dug ... Nobody could stop him, not even the middle-aged lady from Ipswich – who should never have been on a horse – wife of the late Joint Master. She shouted with the rest, 'Stop the fox! Stop the fox!'... hitting at it with her whip. The lash got under the horse's tail. The sober steed, his ears laid flat, his tail nipped into his quarters, began to kick and buck, while the late Master's wife called out, 'Oh, will somebody get hold of him! I shall be off...'

When the bedraggled fox was finally dug out, it was discovered that he had a wire-snare embedded round a foreleg... After saying what I thought, the Master shouted back at me, 'If you don't like it, you can go home again.' I said, 'I will!' – and I did.

ALFRED MUNNINGS, bless him, is equally outspoken about the art racket, that was; though he cannot, of course, write exactly as he speaks. Briefly, a writer's books may have a bad press, but people can get at his books and read them for themselves; often critics damn a book, but the public reads it. In painting, at least in the old days, critics and dealers could contain the work of a painter, the one by misprision, the other by not trading in it. A leading critic, however barren he be by nature (as opposed to the artist born with the seeds of creation), had a power, publicly speaking, far greater than that of the artist.

It was in one of the large rooms upstairs that the body of artists who had been in France painting for the Canadian War Records gave a dinner to Paul Konody, the art critic who had chosen and sent them all out.

In art I take the leading part
Of a great concern I am the start;
For I am the brain, the mind, the heart
Of the great Konodian Army.

Men of genius great and small
Wield their brush at my beck and call.
I hire the greatest men in Town;
I raise them up or I dash them down
With a friendly nod or haughty frown,

And major's rank and major's pay
Are granted him on that very day,
And he goes to France for a pleasant stay
With my great Konodian Army...

Munnings continues:

Konody and some of his artist friends, including myself, did not see eye to eye in matters of art. He, the leading critic of the day, was the one who, more than all the others, backed futurist exhibitions then taking place in London.

'Your Reynolds, Gainsborough, and the eighteenth-century men were painting false rubbish,' he used to say.

I well remember a sale of Lord Henry Bentinck's modern pictures at Christie's. Konody had been his adviser, and the top price of the sale was somewhere in the neighbourhood of thirty shillings. Seeing Konody afterwards, I said:

'My dear fellow, why on earth didn't you run up the price of the pictures?'

'Ah!' said he, 'I might have been landed with one!'

The book goes on like that, covering a period of after the first World War to just before the start of the second. It laments the passing of some things, condemns the spoliation of rivers, due to pollution and the removal of water for Water Boards. It will be a valuable book for the social historian; and, needless to add, Sir Alfred Munning's accounts of his travels – England, France, Germany, Spain, America – and of the many wonderful horses he saw and painted, classic names, owners, and backgrounds – most of them of a way of life now passed away into the age of Utility and Futility – will be sought while horse-breeding continues. And don't imagine that the horsey life is dull! It is of terrific interest and fun, like all other creative human activities. Oh, this is a warm and endearing book, full of enjoyment of living.

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