

# Book Reviews

Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, ed. *Ford Madox Ford and His Relationship to Stephen Crane and Henry James*. Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1987.

As the title implies, Professor Brita Lindberg-Seyersted's new book, *Ford Madox Ford and His Relationship to Stephen Crane and Henry James* is about the relationship between the British writer, Ford Madox Ford (or Hueffer) and his two American colleagues, Stephen Crane and Henry James. In her introduction, Lindberg-Seyersted tells us that she will not "presume to present a radically new view of the relationship between Ford Madox Ford and his two American fellow writers", but that her purpose is "to give as full and balanced a picture as possible of these contacts, especially the ups and downs of his relations with James as they developed throughout the years" (p. 13). The emphasis is to be on Ford—in that sense, she is as she says, "biased",—and in addition to corrections of details and inadequacies in previously reproduced letters, Lindberg-Seyersted offers her readers five previously unpublished "letters and other communications from James to Ford" and one letter from Ford to Crane.

Brita Lindberg-Seyersted accomplishes exactly what she sets out to do—towards the end of *Ford Madox Ford and His Relationship to Stephen Crane and Henry James* the reader has learned many new and interesting things about Ford's relationship with especially James. The book is well-written, entertaining and easy to read. The picture that unfolds of Ford Madox Ford is that of a lovable and generous, but also high-strung and ambiguous personality. Already as a young man, Ford admired the Master and was happy to be introduced to him. Ford had literary ambitions of his own, and what he especially admired in James was what he himself was working towards and some day would like to master, namely the elder writer's superb literary technique and the way in which he could start virtually empty-handed (the "germs" for his stories were often nothing but a particular movement or an insignificant comment at the dinner table) and still end up with a wonderfully exact and true psychological portrait in his novels. For Ford, James was and remained the Master. He wrote extensively—mostly after James died in 1916, however—about the elder writer and probably played an important part in the "rediscovery" of James in the 1920s and '30s.

In his writings on James, Ford displayed what Lindberg-Seyersted calls "a troubled relationship" with his fellow writer. Though mostly reverent and admiring, Ford would at times express a severe dislike bordering on

antipathy. Thus, when approached by the editor of a British magazine in 1934 and asked whether he would write an article on James, Ford declined, explaining that "as the years have gone on I have grown more and more antipathetic to the Master of Rye" (p. 82). When one adds to this another detail, namely that Ford, when writing his literary "history" (his last published work), *The March of Literature, From Confucius' Day to Our Own* (1938), omitted James' name on the list of important authors he included in an Appendix, one cannot help but wonder whether Ford suffered what Harold Bloom has called an "anxiety of influence" towards James. Lindberg-Seyersted explains Ford's occasional outbursts of animosity towards his model and mentor as a result of either James' temporary repudiation of him and Violet Hunt in the wake of their love-affair and subsequent divorce scandal, or as the bitterness caused by Ford's feeling of social inferiority. Both explanations sound convincing, but a Bloomian anxiety-of-influence approach might have yielded equally fruitful results.

On the very last pages, Lindberg-Seyersted asks the question, "to what extent and in what ways was Ford influenced by James in his thinking about fiction and in his practice of the art?" The question of influence seems to me to be one of the most important questions in any book that deals with relationships between writers, and it merits much more attention than it is given, especially as Lindberg-Seyersted concludes that "Henry James had a special significance" for Ford and that "lacking the Master's wide range and sure control of aims and means, in his best works Ford nevertheless rivaled him in psychological insight and mastery of tone." As for the relationship between Ford and Crane and a possible influence of the latter on the former, Lindberg-Seyersted comments how "his brief contact with Crane confirmed him in the adherence to the Impressionist tenets" (p.87). This is all we hear about Crane's significance for Ford. The chapter on Crane and Ford (chapter 1) barely takes up one third of the book—the remainder deals with James and Ford—and it never really becomes clear exactly why Lindberg-Seyersted has chosen to include Crane. After all, the reader is told, it was Joseph Conrad who "helped determine the way Ford was to go" (p. 34) and Flaubert who "was the first and greatest 'father', who influenced Ford's theory and practice of the novel" (p. 87)—why, one cannot help wondering, was precisely Crane chosen and not e.g. Conrad, or Flaubert for that matter?

These suggestions and questions are minor, however. Professor Lindberg-Seyersted has given us a well-written and interesting addition to our knowledge of the literary and personal life of Ford Madox Ford.