

UNQUIET FLOWS THE DON - New Republic, The - October 7, 2009

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MAURICE BOWRA: A LIFE By Leslie Mitchell (Oxford University Press, 385 pp., \$50) AS WARDEN of Wadham College in Oxford, president of the British Academy, the author of well-known books on ancient Greek literature, and a conversationalist of legendary brilliance, Maurice Bowra seemed, in the middle of the last century, the very embodiment of Oxford life. Enjoying a huge international reputation as a scholar, a wit, and an administrator, he was duly elected into prestigious academies and awarded honorary degrees in both Europe and America. George VI knighted him in 1951. Yet few who were not alive at that time know his name today. For those of the younger generation who are aware of him at all, his career conjures up the Oxford of *Brideshead Revisited*, and it has been said that he was the model for Mr. Samgrass. A few of his bright remarks linger on among the chattering classes: "Buggers can't be choosers," or "Where there's death there's hope," or "He is a man who has no public virtues and no private parts." But for the most part Bowra has sunk into oblivion, to emerge from time to time in an obituary or in the voluminous correspondence of Isaiah Berlin. Wadham College, which Bowra led from 1938 until 1970 and elevated from a long tradition of mediocrity into one of glittering prominence, commissioned this biography by Leslie Mitchell, an "old boy" of Wadham and a historian of modern England and France. Mitchell knew his subject personally, and he has had access to the archives of many of the notable figures with whom Bowra was in contact. He has a deep sympathy for the contradictions and the anxieties that drove Bowra to almost frenetic activity in Oxford, but unfortunately he has no comprehension of ancient Greek culture or the world of classical scholars, whose rejection drove Bowra into university administration in the first place and then consigned his publications to the trash heap soon after his death. Once he was dead, the verbal assaults that Bowra hurled at his detractors came no more. Bowra's incandescent talk was admired wherever he went, and he never failed to deliver. In commemorating him for *The Times*, Isaiah Berlin wrote that "his wit was verbal and cumulative: the words came in short, sharp bursts of precisely aimed, concentrated fire, as image, pun, metaphor, parody, seemed spontaneously to generate one another in a succession of marvelously imagined patterns, sometimes rising to high, wildly comical fantasy." Anyone who has ever listened to Berlin himself cannot but think that he is describing his own way of talking, and yet the description of Bowra's wit is right on target. Bowra and Berlin were old friends, and the peculiarly dazzling logorrhea that characterized both of them doubtless arose from decades of conversation together. BOWRA WAS BORN in 1898 in China, where his father worked in the Chinese customs service, but he soon came back to England and was given an impeccable classical education at Cheltenham. Although his exotic origins may have encouraged a lifelong interest in foreign literatures, Bowra was irreproachably British in background and manner, and for someone like Isaiah Berlin, born of a Jewish family in Riga and arriving in Oxford by way of St. Petersburg, he must have provided a seductive model of sophistication. Berlin saw Bowra as "a major liberating influence," and many years later, in a letter in the summer of 1952, he poured out his gratitude to the warden of Wadham with perhaps excessive self-deprecation: "As you know, I take a low view of myself and all I do and friendship means more to me-and always has-than anything else at all... It is not merely love and admiration for you that I feel, though these emotions are genuine enough; but I owe you a transformation of my entire mode of life and attitude towards it. It is a trite way of

putting it perhaps, but you did 'liberate' me.... I do not for a moment suppose that you were aware of the strength and emancipating power of your mere presence, but if I am anything to anybody the ... responsibility is largely yours." (The full text of this letter has now been published in *Enlightening: Letters 1946-1960*, the delightful second volume of Berlin's correspondence, skillfully edited by Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes.) Even John Sparrow, the warden of All Souls College, whom Bowra often annoyed mightily, wrote affectingly in verse: "You made us what we are;/Our jokes, our joys, our hopes, our hatreds too,/The outrageous things we do, or want to do-/How much of all of them we owe to you!" The liberating force of Bowra must have been real, although I never felt it myself on the few occasions when I met him towards the end of his life. For anyone bright enough to respond to the challenges of Bowra's manner, he was clearly charismatic, and in the 1920s and early 1930s he surrounded himself with young admirers, who always ran the risk of banishment from the charmed circle. Among his undergraduate guests were Kenneth Clark, John Betjeman, Hugh Gaitskill, Evelyn Waugh, and Cecil Day-Lewis. Both Isaiah Berlin and John Sparrow survived and profited from this quite literally intoxicating society. Mitchell reveals very clearly that the pied-piper aspect of Bowra itself sprang from deep fears of rejection and failure, and he tells, as Berlin himself did at the memorial service in 1971, that H.W.B. Joseph, a demanding philosopher to whom the young Bowra was assigned for tutorials at New College, nearly destroyed his pupil's confidence by constantly challenging and mocking his assertions. It was only by dropping philosophy at this stage that Bowra managed to recover his equilibrium and go on to a successful undergraduate career in classics. But the sense of inadequacy and failure never left him-and in a notorious episode in 1936, it changed the entire course of his life. Gilbert Murray, whose name among English-speakers was synonymous with Greek literature in the early twentieth century, was about to retire from the Regius Professorship of Greek at Oxford. He had taught the young Bowra and apparently led him to believe that he might well become his successor in the distinguished post. But to the surprise of almost everyone, Bowra himself above all, the electors to the chair chose E.R. Dodds, an Irish scholar of Neoplatonic philosophy. This was someone completely outside the circle of Oxford academics in which Bowra had already found a niche, and his friends could only assume that Murray had dropped his support of Bowra. The outcome of the election was devastating. Bowra promptly went off to be a visiting professor in America, where he was offered a chair at Harvard. But, Oxonian to the core, he returned and decided instead to accept the wardenship of Wadham as a new vocation in the absence of a chair of Greek. This episode was absolutely crucial in determining Bowra's future career. It left him with a feeling, which Joseph had first instilled in him, of being second-rate-a feeling that impelled him to prove himself over and over again in a series of books on Greek as well as modern literature. What happened in the summer of 1936 can only be explained by reference to the state of classical scholarship at the time. In the previous year Bowra had published a critical edition of the poems of Pindar in the highly esteemed series of Oxford Classical Texts, and this was obviously meant to be the major scholarly work that would ensure his elevation to the Regius Chair. Unfortunately, his edition of Pindar had the opposite effect. A review of Bowra's book appeared in the distinguished German periodical *Gnomon*, which all professional classicists consulted with respect. One of the journal's founders, Eduard Fraenkel, had recently arrived in Oxford as a Jewish refugee from Germany, and he may well have had early warning of the review of Bowra's Pindar that was about to appear; but it would certainly have been available in print before the electors met in 1936. Murray must have seen it, and Bowra, who read German with facility, would have seen it too. The reviewer, Alexander Turyn (then in Warsaw), found the text of the poems marginally acceptable because it simply reproduced another scholar's published text, but he pronounced Bowra's own scholarship "completely worthless" (*vollkommen wertlos*). And this review must have been read also by Arthur Darby Nock at Harvard, to whom

Murray had written for an opinion about his successor. Nock told me explicitly in 1962 that he had written against the election of Bowra and had put forward the name of Dodds, whose scholarship he had known through his own work on late antique philosophy. In his autobiography, Bowra's cool reference to Nock during his brief stay at Harvard in late 1936 suggests to me that he had some knowledge of what had gone on behind the scenes. Curiously, the choice of Dodds as professor proved to be an inspired one. His great book *The Greeks and the Irrational* is, without question, one of the masterpieces of classical learning in the twentieth century, and his edition of Euripides's *Bacchae* reigns supreme even now. No less curiously, the bitter disappointment that drove Bowra into the wardenship of Wadham proved to be the making of the Bowra who acquired such renown in postwar Oxford. The electors to the Regius Chair achieved far more than they imagined. Bowra never again attempted to do a critical edition of a Greek author. In a memorial that appeared in the *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Dodds's successor in the Regius Chair, Hugh Lloyd-Jones, wrote candidly that "Bowra was not suited to be a textual critic. He lacked the accuracy and caution expected of an editor, and he had been denied the gift of textual divination.... His Oxford text of Pindar (1935), though its apparatus criticus contains some useful matter, has not enough positive merits to compensate for its numerous inaccuracies." After becoming warden of Wadham, Bowra devoted himself entirely to expository books about literature, apart from his autobiographical *Memories*, which he strangely refused to carry beyond the 1930s. The published oeuvre remains something of a mystery to this day, because it is uniformly so dull. Anyone with a knowledge of Bowra's conversation and wit, and of the poetic parodies that lacerated the reputations of his contemporaries, will find it difficult to imagine why his academic prose was so utterly undistinguished. As Lloyd-Jones remarked, "Those who knew only Bowra's writings may find it hard to understand, but no person who knew him at all well can fail to be surprised that nothing that he ever wrote gives the faintest inkling of the impression which he made in conversation.... Even where he avoids cliché, what he wrote seems flat and pedestrian beside the brilliance of what he said. To this deficiency of style corresponds a deficiency of content." I think that the reason for this bizarre situation is that Bowra at his best was pure artifice, whereas scholarship was-and is-not. His coruscating brilliance in speech, his puns and put-downs, were simply not enough for serious work. Unlike A.E. Housman, he was incapable of uniting wit with scholarship, and Housman could do so only in print. IT IS HERE that we must look for what made Maurice Bowra ultimately so different from Isaiah Berlin, who professed that he had learned so much from him. Oxford's two greatest talkers were close friends. They both could dazzle audiences, and both had a profound interest in foreign cultures. Berlin's sovereign command of Russian language and literature could hardly be matched by Bowra's readings of Russian poetry, but it is impressive that both promoted this literature in an Anglophone environment. Yet what gradually became clear in the relationship between these two men was Berlin's interest in ideas and his breadth of human sympathy. Bowra had neither. Perhaps the memory of Joseph's tutorials and the abiding feeling of being second-rate kept Bowra away from anything that remotely resembled philosophical thought. His steely carapace of wit and parody constantly impeded him from showing or accepting human warmth. As the years passed, the brilliance of Berlin, the originality of his thinking and the depth of his learning, never faded, as he reached out to an ever larger band of friends and intellectuals whose horizons were all but imperceptible to Bowra. A telling case was Berlin's regard for Edmund Wilson, of whom Bowra greatly disapproved. Writing to Noel Annan from Harvard in 1949, Berlin confided that "I secretly see Mr Edmund Wilson with whom (don't tell Maurice) my relations are becoming quite warm." The latest volume of Berlin's correspondence, vastly enlarged after he took up the dictaphone, displays a beguiling openness to people of all sorts and to philosophical ideas. The difference is encapsulated in the titles of their books: Berlin's *Historical Inevitability* or Two

Concepts of Liberty, by comparison with Bowra's *The Greek Experience* or *Heroic Poetry*. Not that Bowra was imperceptive. His suspicion of Adam von Trott, the attractive German Rhodes scholar who left golden memories at Balliol before the war, was not irrational, despite von Trott's terrible execution after the plot to kill Hitler. As Mitchell observes, "For some reason, Bowra had a visceral distrust of the man." When von Trott appeared in Oxford to assure Bowra that the members of the German opposition would remove Hitler on their own provided that the Nazis could be left in control of the Sudetenland and Austria, Bowra smelled a rat. The signs that von Trott ultimately turned against Hitler are strong, but equally so are those of his earlier complicity with the Nazis. Even Berlin seems to have questioned the widespread opinion that von Trott had been a martyr. In 1951, David Astor, the editor of *The Observer*, who had admired von Trott since their time together at Balliol, viciously attacked Bowra when he received his knighthood. Berlin rightly saw in Astor's hostility a wholly unwarranted belief that Bowra was somehow responsible for bringing about von Trott's death. It is true that Bowra had written to Felix Frankfurter that he had doubts about von Trott's commitment to oppose Hitler. British intelligence intercepted his letter (and presumably made use of it). It would have put von Trott in an impossible position, but Bowra may have been right. (Justin Cartwright has recently fictionalized the remarkable story in *The Song Before It Is Sung*.) Although Bowra may have had some indirect influence on war policy, as in the von Trott case, he was not called upon, like so many of his Oxford colleagues, to serve in diplomacy or in intelligence. This meant that he had to endure considerable isolation out of term-time in Oxford, and he clearly resented Berlin's posting to the British Embassy in Washington, where, according to Bowra, he was "pillowed on pink, satin sheets." Many noted Oxonians were breaking codes in Bletchley or picking up rumors in foreign places (John Betjeman in Dublin, Ronald Syme in Istanbul). Bowra, as an old soldier from the previous war, was "deeply anxious to do some war job," as he admitted to Frederick Lindemann. HIS FRIENDS TRIED to help, but without success. Bowra's apparent, though not flamboyant, homosexuality may have rendered him untrustworthy, although if he had possessed desirable technical skills, as Alan Turing (another homosexual) had in breaking the Germans' Enigma code, Bowra might have been employed in the war effort just the same. Mitchell is probably right in concluding that "establishment figures, so long mocked and teased in dinner party stories and scurrilous verse, took a terrible revenge." That scurrilous verse was notorious. When Lloyd-Jones wrote his memorial in 1972, he tempered his account of Bowra's boring prose by alluding to his scabrous poetry: "His least inhibited writing was his occasional verse, and it is sad that little of this is likely to be published while those who can recognize its allusions are alive." By a strange irony, Henry Hardy, the indefatigable editor of Isaiah Berlin's writings, published Bowra's "unpublishable" verse in 2005 from a manuscript left with John Sparrow at All Souls College, under the title *New Bats in Old Belfries*. Bowra's clever, brittle, and obscene parodies can now be read and assessed. Almost all of them are directed to his contemporaries, and the ones maligning his enemies are unspeakably vicious and small-minded. Even his friends could not have been altogether pleased with the ways in which they were commemorated. His epithalamium on the marriage of Kenneth Clark begins: "Angels of St. James's Park,/Make the bed for Kenneth Clark:/Make it when such loves are sealed/Broad as any battlefield./When he strips him for the fight/Help him in his work tonight./See that all the night till morn/No preventative is torn;/Many a useless child may live/From a torn preventative." Bowra's parody of John Betjeman's "Dorset," under the title "Major Prophet," is about none other than Isaiah Berlin. It is hardly an affectionate tribute, although a tribute it is: "See the young girls' enraptured faces/To the adagio listening./Oh, hark, for sex-appeal is calling/And ripples down those bended necks./The master calls them to attention,/Unveils the mysteries of sex." The abundant sexual content of Bowra's poems is so consistently puerile, however smartly phrased, that one has to wonder about his emotional

maturity. He had been initiated into gay sex in Germany in 1932 through his friend Adrian Bishop, a Wildean character who finally became an Anglican monk to expiate his sins. Bowra's most elaborate verse parody, "Old Croaker," taking off from T.S. Eliot's "East Coker" and alluding along the way to Milton and Yeats, among others, was a grotesque celebration of Bishop's debauchery: "I will arise and go now and go to have a pee,/Way down in Innisfree./T hat's where I wish to be/With a Corporal on my knee./Oh is it town or gown or tousled hair,/A tousled boy-scout's hair/Inside the WC?" Still, despite his flings in Germany, Bowra's sexual extravagance in Oxford was largely verbal, and as his reputation as the warden of Wadham grew he became increasingly sensitive to being labeled a homosexual-to such an extent that he refused to meet with Jean Genet, who had come to Oxford to receive an honorary degree. Bowra's pubescent sexuality and sharply honed wit seemed to leave little room for such feelings as tenderness or compassion, to say nothing of love. Yet there is one hint of such emotion in the aftermath of his German experience of 1932. He had been introduced to members of the circle of the poetic guru Stefan George, who exalted the boy he called Maximin into the muse of his poetry. (Oddly, Mitchell insists on spelling the poet's name George without the final "e," but then his German seems shaky since he translates *wahrscheinlich* as "truly" instead of "probably.") Bowra went on to introduce George's work to English readers, and in 1934 he met in Oxford one of the poet's most distinguished disciples, the medieval historian Ernst Kantorowicz, author of a magisterial biography of Frederick the Second and *The King's Two Bodies*, a hugely influential study of medieval political theory. A personal friendship of such intensity and longevity ensued that Mitchell reasonably suspects the two became lovers. Kantorowicz prescribed that all Bowra's letters to him be destroyed upon his death, and so we are deprived of seeing what Bowra wrote, but a letter from Kantorowicz to Bowra survives with thanks for a photo of the young Bowra in his "buggerable days." This might be simple playfulness, of course, but it is remarkable that a transatlantic relationship between the two, including European travel together, lasted for several decades-when Kantorowicz was in California at Berkeley and then at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. As an executor of his estate, Ralph Giesey has testified that when Kantorowicz died in 1963 there were three photographs beside his bed. One was of his mother, another of Stefan George, and the third of Maurice Bowra. This is the only glimpse we have today of any kind of deep emotional attachment in the entire course of Bowra's life. Soon after Kantorowicz's death, Bowra wrote to Felix Frankfurter that "my own debt to him is incalculable. He stirred my intelligence, bolstered my morale, amused me with dazzling paradoxes and intuitions and formulations." For those of Bowra's old friends who outlived him, he was difficult in his last years. He became deaf and demanding. Even so generous and forgiving a person as Berlin clearly had problems in coping with him as time passed. Already in 1954 Berlin wrote to Sparrow that he avoided invitations when he knew that Bowra would also be present. "I cramp his style," wrote Berlin, "and he knows it-there is nothing I can do about that." Life beyond the warden's lodgings at Wadham was inconceivable for Bowra, who had depended for decades upon college servants. The college prolonged his position for two extra years and then provided rooms for him in a new college building. But it is scarcely surprising that he could not tolerate his new existence, and death came swiftly after he left the wardenship in 1970. Tacitus wrote, in the biography of his father-in-law Agricola, that persons such as himself who lived on into a different kind of world from the one in which they grew up not only outlived other people but themselves as well: *non modo aliorum sed etiam nostri superstites sumus*. This might well be applied to Bowra. He survived himself. When he died, the glamorous and witty soirées belonged to an irrecoverable past. The naughty poems were already gathering dust. Meanwhile, Isaiah Berlin, with his irrepressible intellect, his passion for ideas, and his friends all over the world, was triumphantly building a reputation to which Bowra could never have aspired. John Sparrow revealed

a heartbreaking glimpse of the affection that might have been, when he imagined that on judgment day Bowra himself would divide the dead between the celestial and the nether realms: "Send us to Hell or Heaven or where you will,/Promise us only you'll be with us still:/Without you, Heaven would be too dull to bear,/and Hell will not be Hell if you are there." Mitchell's biography of Bowra serves as a requiem for the Oxford of Brideshead."

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