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A True Conservative: JOHN BRAY

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John Bray is one of the rarest of creatures, a true conservative. Unlike reactionaries and revolutionaries who are driven by a contempt for people as they are, Bray takes an unillusioned delight in living. He is tolerant towards human folly, but contemptuous of wickedness and oppression.

These two books provide an overview of Bray as a man of letters and learning and as a public figure. They contain essays, parts of a biography, a generous selection of his poetry and occasional addresses. All the work has the same qualities of tough reasonableness and wry detachment. Behind the poet, the historian and the polemicist, we are constantly aware of the judicious stance of the lawyer, although there are no examples of his significant contribution to both jurisprudential wisdom and writing. Rather, we are given the work of a man for whom the great institution of the law has been a constituent part of a liberal education. Reading his work gives us the privilege of sharing his education.

Bray's outlook is essentially comic, combining an admiration for human aspirations with a keen awareness of our recurring failures and follies. This outlook in turn generates the conservatism which is not aware of the painful struggle by which we have gained the values of civilisation to watch idly while these values are eroded by fashion, apathy or ill-judged social experiment. His Prometheus is constantly throwing off his

shackles while a jealous Zeus waits with equal constancy to bolt them on again.

These qualities inspire the poem 'Epidaurus 1974', written about a performance of Prometheus Bound given while Greece was under the rule of the colonels. The audience, including some of the rulers, are

> Flanked by guards with tommy-guns, drawn back in the wings of the stage.
>
> For Greece was then ruled by tyrants, as in the days of Pisistratus,
>
> Though far less adroit than he: middle functionary fascism:
>
> Colonels not generals: sub-managers or directors: head prefects not headmasters,
>
> Suburban style, familiar phenomenon: calisthenics and concentration camps.
>
> And eternal summer gilded, in selected isles of Greece,
>
> The chains of their detainees.

The conversational style of the loosely accented blank verse--unusual for Brey, who normally prefers more tighty metrical forms--makes more vivid the harsh clash between the civilised connotations of classical Greece and its sunny isles with ancient tyranny and its contemporary suburban counterpart. The references to managers and headmasters and prefects make it clear that he is referring not just to the actuality in Greece but to its potential anywhere.

Similarly, the counsels of Hermes, "eternal pimp of power", are familiar in our own society:

'You can't win. Zeus holds all the aces. You were mad to befriend mankind.

Be sensible, do what he bids you, before worse things befall you.'

This is the appearance of reasonableness which in fact would sell out everything that the theatre, the play, and the two poets, ancient and contemporary, stand for.

In Bray's poem however we hear Prometheus' voice ringing through the ages, and the answer of the audience in our own age.

'I will never submit to Zeus. I have seen gods raised up and cast down.

There were rulers in heaven before him. His reign will have its end.

Though he shatter the world about me, I will not bow to his will.'

And then the lightning struck him and the rock sank down below.

The Greeks stood up on the benches. They were clapping and cheering and shouting.

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The guards were looking for orders, but what could the rulers do?

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So they did nothing and left in a hurry and four weeks later they fell.

The writer tells us that he left the theatre with high steps, convinced of two propositions which he had always hoped true: "One concerning the power of the arts, one concerning the nature

of man". There is no need for him to spell out his meaning--the action of play and people has already done that for him. But these two propositions are the source of the strength in his own work.

In this poem, Bray's detached stance enables him to control his anger. The same attitude lends wry amusement to his autobiographical observations of Adelaide and insight to his study of Shakespeare's Coriolanus, a play which he interprets as a study in sublime egotism. It is the quality which he finds admirable in the lifeof Gallienus. In the extracts from his biography of this third-century Roman emperor, Bray shows him as a man whose self-possession enabled him to hold together the empire against the tides of barbarism while betraying him into extravagances of personal behaviour which eventually led to his political downfall. This work is a lawyer's history in which the author is not concerned so much with examining cause and effect or recreating social reality as with weighing the evidence to ascertain exactly what did happen and what verdict we should pass on Gallienus' conduct of affairs in a particular set of circumstances.

Examining the reasons that led the Emperor Decius to launch a persecution of the Christians by demanding of them an act of public worship, Bray comments that

> Like many energetic public-spirited and humourless rulers through the centuries, Decius no doubt thought that the arrangement of mass demonstrations of loyalty would lift public morale and improve the tone of public sentiment.

This summary combines judicial appraisal of the available evidence with the fruits of personal observation of public life and conduct. In the same way, when he examines the evidence of Gallienus' personal life, his insight into human motives enables him to reach an appropriate verdict on the evidence of prejudiced witnesses and to extend it to a general observation on human affairs:

> I think, therefore, that Gallienus can be acquitted of the charge of indifference to public affairs but I think also that he cannot be acquitted of the charge of giving the appearance of it. Indeed, I think he probably got satisfaction out of giving the appearance of it. The desire to shock the humourless and conventional is strong in certain temperaments, but a ruler of a great state possessing such a temperament would do well to suppress that desire. (p.47)

The sharpness of the observation comes from the juxtaposition of what should be with what the author knows is the normal state of affairs. Unlike Claudius, he rejoices in the fact that while our words may fly upwards our thoughts remain steadfastly on earth.

Bray's earthiness has frequently shocked the Adelaide establishment into a semblance of life, and he undoubtedly sympathises with Gallienus while recognising the political costs of such indulgence. But what may be a political cost is an unquestioned artistic benefit, as in his satiric comment on 'the Birds of the North Terrace' who share the roostings of their committee with the denizens of the Adelaide Club,

And from aloft their droppings star

Mercedes-Benz and Jaguar,

Postscripting with earth's commentary

The affluent society.

Bray's work covers the gamut from commentary to analysis to celebration. but he is always as deadly accurate as the birds.

This is not to say that he is always right. His discourses on education uphold the values of the old without recognising the importance and difficulty of translating them into the new. His affirmations of the value of the university tradition ring with the force, if not the eloquence, of Newman, but his contrasting devaluation of technological education undermines his own case. At a time when John Button and John Dawkins are leading the charge of the vandals, it is not enough for the champions of liberal values to defend their own citadels--like Gallienus, they need to carry their standards into the camps of the barbarians. Universities as we know them are the product of the renaissance, and as such they embody both the glory of its humanism and the disaster of the division it introduced between the liberal and the industrial arts--arts and sciences on the one hand, technology on the other. Technology then as now changed the material basis of society, and therefore its culture. The challenge to educatior today is to bring liberal values back into technology, to educate technologists who will understand the relationship between their professions and the kind of values that Bray upholds. This in turn requires that students of the humanities and sciences understand their own studies and

now published in his occasional addresses as The Emperor's Gatekeepers

technology itself as social products which determine our relationships with each other and with our material environment.

Bray's acceptance of the universal absurdity and nobility of human nature operating within the constraints of eternal values reduces history in his eyes to an unchanging cycle of comedy. This may account for his apparently unfashionable style. The formality of his writing imposes a framework of logic on ungovernable human behavior. This conflicts with the contemporary view that the only certainties are our sense perceptions, that values and reason are themselves the products of history, and that poetry and art are the means by which we create a reality of our own. Bray appeals beyond the tommy-guns of our own insecurity and oppression to the certain values of freedom, humor and personal responsibility. In one sense this makes his work ahistorical, yet in another it is profoundly historical and of its time. The logical, grammatical and metrical order of the poetry is the product of a culture which places the human at the centre of events. He recognises the limitations on individual possibility without in any way diminishing individual responsibility. This sense of proportion, of order, is at once classical, harking back to the ideal of the mean, and pertinent to an age threatened by the arrogance of intellectuals and activists who would remake the world in their own image. The order of his poetry order is the measure of our sanity. In an age of enthusiasm Bray speaks for those who, with Tacitus, a historian of similarly impassioned detachment, can claim that in their life and career

The senate, too, maintained its ordered way.