

Reviews

Never such innocence

by Margaret Moran

Paul Delany. *The Neo-Pagans: Rupert Brooke and the Ordeal of Youth*. New York: The Free Press; Toronto: Collier Macmillan, 1987. Pp. xviii, 270; 40 plates. US\$24.95; C\$37.95.

DELANY CLAIMS AS his primary goal the demythologizing of the life of Rupert Brooke. As is well known, the poet became a symbol for the sacrifice of a generation after his death on the way to Gallipoli in 1915. The sentiments expressed in his Five War Sonnets—especially “The Soldier”—and his splendid physical appearance combined to make his name evoke the perfect soldier of the popular imagination. For his most recent biographer, such idealization detracted from the actual interesting person: “there was more to him than ingenuousness, a talent for sub-Keatsian verse, and a classic profile” (p. 4). Yet those extra dimensions turn out to be insufficient, in a life cut short at twenty-eight, to justify a new book-length study. Thus, in practice, Brooke proves to be the focus of the attention less than half the time. For the rest, the main concern lies with his circle of friends, the “Neo-Pagans”, as Virginia Woolf nicknamed them. “The core of the group was Rupert, Justin Brooke (no relation), Jacques and Gwen Raverat, Frances Cornford, Katherine (‘Ka’) Cox and the four Olivier sisters—Margery, Brynhild, Daphne, Noel” (p. xiii).

Both in the Introduction and in the chapter on the discussion of Brooke’s mental breakdown, Delany explains that the poet’s legend was perpetuated by friends who made themselves guardians of his reputation for innocence. He explains that for the British people in 1915 “his death needed a life to match: the young Apollo, carefree with his friends under the apple boughs at Grantchester” (p. 212). Taking their cue from the wartime mood, Edward Marsh and Geoffrey Keynes had no interest in bringing forth any documents that could threaten the icon of national heroism. For their suppression of truth they are here chastised (p. 153). But to stress the obstacles biographers and critics have thereby encountered in their quest for truth is to deflect attention away from the fact that quite substantial parts of Brooke’s story have long since leaked out. We have, for instance, known

for some time that Brooke’s charm, affection and astonishing handsomeness caused representatives of both sexes to find him irresistible. (Among those most severely smitten was Lytton Strachey’s brother James.) Yet, perversely, Brooke found only the chaste and the unattainable capable of inspiring his lasting devotion. Similarly, it has been an open secret for decades that Brooke’s idyllic dream of youth, leisure and rustic simplicity had been lost in his nervous collapse of 1912, well before the outbreak of war. Are we intended to think that the poet’s life has remained entirely enshrouded in mystery until 1987, the centennial of his birth?

The claims made for the group of friends, the Neo-Pagans, may also be somewhat overdrawn. The difficulty occurs in sentences like this: “Superficially alike, Bloomsbury and the Neo-Pagans had crucial differences of style, beliefs and morals” (p. 121). Or again: “The utopian socialism of the Neo-Pagans was derided by the predominantly Liberal Cambridge ‘Apostles’” (p. xv). Other assertions about their differences from the Fabians are no less problematic. For even when read in context, these statements lack the delicacy required by these “dewdabblers”. Such comparisons crush them with a borrowed intellectual, social and political weight. Another comparison, the last note in *The Neo-Pagans*, creates its own ironies by its epic quality: “The pre-war German ‘Youth Movement’ had much in common with Neo-Paganism, but differed in two crucial ways: it was a mass movement (with some 25,000 members in 1913), and it claimed the right to supplant its elders and rule Germany in better style” (p. 256–7).

The Neo-Pagans espoused a pastoral escapism that held little temptation for Bertrand Russell. For Lady Ottoline Morrell, he described a rare encounter.

I went to Grantchester ... to tea with Jacques Raverat who is to marry Gwen Darwin. He has immense charm, but like all people who have superficial and obvious charm, I think he is weak and has no firm purpose. He is staying with Rupert Brooke whom I dislike. I find there Keynes and Miss Olivier (daughter of Jamaica Olivier) and Olwyn Ward, daughter of Prof. James Ward. Young people now-a-days are odd—Xtian names and great familiarity, rendered easy by a complete freedom from passion on the side of the men. (P. 124)

On the basis of this passage, Delany concludes that Russell “certainly loathed Rupert’s breezy schoolboy-hero manner” (*ibid.*). Had Rupert told him the opinions he had formed about Germany on a visit earlier that year, Russell would have been outraged. Brooke sent this impression to their mutual acquaintance, Eddie Marsh.

I have sampled and sought out German culture. It has changed all my political views. I am wildly in favour of nineteen new Dreadnoughts. German culture must never, never, prevail. The Germans are nice, and well-meaning, and they

try; but they are SOFT. Oh! They ARE soft. The only good things (outside music perhaps) are the writings of Jews who live in Vienna. (P. 120)

Yet immediately before the war, their antithetical views did not surface, for one meeting at least. Russell confessed his mixed reaction: "I mean to hate him but when I see him I rather like him" (to Ottoline, no. 1,031, May 1914). A year later, Russell wrote from Cambridge: "I am feeling the weight of the war much more since I came back here—one is made terribly aware of the waste when one is here. And Rupert Brooke's death brought it home to me" (no. 1,264, 10 May 1915). In his *Autobiography*, Russell included a letter of 27 August 1918 expressing his fury over Marsh's memoir. Although Brooke himself had been entirely free of "humbug", Marsh had transformed his life story into a complete sham.¹ Elsewhere in the *Autobiography*, Russell made reference to Brooke's apotheosis from a "flippant young man" to the "golden-haired god who had given his life for his country" (p. 220). Clearly, this icon has been blasted for some time.

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