JOHN GALSWORTHY

A Reassessment

ALEC FRÉCHET

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Translated from the French
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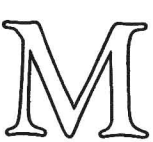

First published as
John Galsworthy: L'homme, le romancier, le critique social
by Librairie Klincksieck, Paris, 1979

First published in English 1982 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 0 333 31535 9

Typeset in Great Britain by
Scarborough Typesetting Services
and printed in Hong Kong

Foreword

Professor Alec Fréchet's reassessment comes at an appropriate time, when John Galsworthy's reputation, after so many vicissitudes, seems at last to be permanently established. This has happened because of something that could never have been thought possible at the time when he was writing: television. Significantly enough, not the cinema (the film recounting Barry Lyndon's adventures did little to enhance Thackeray's reputation among the general public, just as *Tom Jones* had done little for Fielding's), but a serialised version which, week after week, repeated over several years, showed characters on the television screen that became like members of the family circle. If Soames has today taken on his full dimension in so many countries, including France, it is certainly through the agency of the BBC, which has made him as familiar to us as any Balzac hero.

Yet the popularity of *The Forsyte Saga* might not have been so widespread if the work itself had not crystallised a moment in the development of ideas. Galsworthy went through a long purgatory before people realised that, far from being a conservative bent on portraying an upper middle-class family reclining on its privileges, he had perceived the premonitory tremors of all that was to emerge in the explosion and aftermath of the sustained shock of two wars, and that has now come to form the very fibre of our day-to-day problems, in the fields of women's liberation, the religious crisis, the hypocrisies of the established order, or the demands of the exploited. Finally, with amazement, we discover that Galsworthy the gentleman, somehow rather too stoical, rather too stiff, in short rather too distinguished not to seem hidebound, old-fashioned, was, as it were, the litmus paper that was to reveal the great contemporary conflicts of society.

Such a realisation involved close study not only of his novels, but also of the stories, essays, plays and poems: an exhaustive undertaking which, combined with an investigation of the man's personality, and an assessment of the guiding principles that

underlay his social criticisms, form a panorama of the Galsworthian contribution to literature.

Might I add that, for me, Professor Fréchet's work is eminently representative of what may be called the school of French Anglicists. This book, a revised version of what was originally a doctoral thesis, received with the highest honours at the University of La Sorbonne Nouvelle, necessarily reflects the requirements, so cherished in our academic tradition, of rigorous exposition, balanced proportions and priority given to ensuring clarity. So readers will not be surprised to detect a strongly architectural construction, and a constant discipline of elucidation. But there is something else. Echoing Alec Fréchet's own sensitivity, this study goes profoundly into its subject, with intuitiveness, warmth and the heart-felt fraternal force of the intellect.

RAYMOND LAS VERGNAS
former Dean of the Faculty of Arts
La Sorbonne

Preface

I was thirteen when my father first sent me to England. He wanted me to acquire a good English accent. He chose a place in Norfolk where nobody for miles around spoke French. My host was a clergyman who had studied at Cambridge. He and his family gave me such a welcome that I have ever since loved and admired England.

Admiration is one of the keys to understanding. I respect and admire Galsworthy, and this has helped me throughout the many years of research that had to be devoted to a close examination of his works. A long time ago, Louis Cazamian, the greatest French scholar of his generation in English literature and civilisation, told me: 'Galsworthy has been unfairly treated, but one day his reputation will rise again.' He was right, and the English public has proved that he was right. In these hard and difficult times, Britain cannot afford to neglect any part of her heritage. Galsworthy's novels belong to that heritage. This is why I hope that this English translation of my work may satisfy the curiosity of English-speaking readers of Galsworthy, as well as those who have watched *The Forsyte Saga* on television with such interest.

I should like to pay tribute to the memory of several of the people who helped me gather my information, and provided me with invaluable personal reminiscences, and who have since died. Among members of the Galsworthy family, these included Frank Galsworthy (the novelist's cousin), Mrs Olive Galsworthy (Edwin Henry's widow), and above all Rudolf Sauter. Among Galsworthy's friends, they included H. V. Marrot (his official biographer), R. H. Mottram, former Mayor of Norwich, himself a writer and author of *For Some We Loved*, and Professor Gilbert Murray.

I owe so much to Rudolf Sauter. In conversations at his home, and in written answers to my questions, he extended my knowledge of his uncle considerably. More than this, his very sensitivity and tact helped me to understand Galsworthy better. I shall always remember his unfailing friendliness.

Frank Swinnerton, Richard Church and Angus Wilson gave me the benefit of their experience of English literary life.

I received wholehearted assistance in my research from several members of the British Council in Paris, London and Vienna.

Mr K. W. Humphreys, Librarian of Birmingham University, and Mr W. Evans, in charge of the Rare Books Department, made it possible for me to examine the Galsworthy Collection donated by Rudolf Sauter in 1962.

Lastly, I wish to express my deep gratitude to Professor R. Las Vergnas, former Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the Sorbonne, and President of La Sorbonne Nouvelle. Without his support and advice my work could never have been completed.

A. F.

Acknowledgements

Mr Charles Pick, the Managing Director of William Heinemann Ltd, London, Mr R. Davies, the Sales Manager of Penguin Books Ltd, and Herr W. Polak, the Managing Director of Paul Zsolnay Verlag, publishers in Vienna and Hamburg, kindly supplied valuable figures concerning sales of Galsworthy's novels.

I wish to thank William Heinemann Ltd and the Society of Authors as the Literary representative of the Estate of John Galsworthy for allowing me to quote from Galsworthy's works.

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Introduction: the Literary Fortunes of John Galsworthy

Galsworthy was twenty-eight when he began to write, and thirty when his first book appeared in print. Success was slow in coming: the first two volumes had to be published at his own expense.

'In 1902,' he wrote, 'after seven years and four books I was still some seventy-five pounds out of pocket, to say nothing of incidental expenses, and had made no name.'[1]

His first financial success came with the publication of *The Man of Property* in 1906. Only small numbers of copies of his previous books had been printed, and they had never been reprinted, whereas *The Man of Property* was reissued four times between 1906 and 1911, and a cheap 'Sixpenny Edition' was available from 1907. After *The Man of Property*, subsequent novels were better received.[2]

This encouraging trend came to an end with the outbreak of the First World War. There was no fervent patriotism in Galsworthy's novels. Though set in the recent past or in contemporary times, they bore no relation to current events. And although they did not express any pacifist views, they were out of tune with the times simply because of the author's detachment from prevailing passions.

With *Saint's Progress*, the steady progress was resumed. Although the plot did not entirely cater to current tastes, the heroine's adventures, showing how the moral climate was deteriorating and conventional ties were slackening, were bound to interest many readers. *In Chancery* achieved no great commercial success, and it was not until *To Let* was published in 1921 that ten thousand copies were printed for a first edition.

On 2 May 1922, when both these novels, preceded by *The Man of Property*, came out in a single volume under the title *The Forsyte Saga*, Galsworthy's fame was finally established. He was fifty-five. From that year until his death in 1933, his popularity continued to grow, in spite of the weaknesses that flawed his later work. *The White Monkey* had a first edition of 15,000, *Caravan* 20,000, and

The Silver Spoon 40,000. And the last trilogy, *End of the Chapter*, enjoyed the same success.

What is the explanation for this sudden popularity, and its steady increase, in the last decade of a career that had begun not only late, but also so slowly and laboriously? Likely reasons are varied and complex. Initially, the uncompromising, harsh, gloomy aspects of the early stories put readers off. But after the First World War, circumstances turned in their favour. Following publication of Lytton Strachey's biographies, *Eminent Victorians* in 1918 and *Queen Victoria* in 1921, *The Forsyte Saga* provided the most comprehensive, powerful and monumental expression of the anti-Victorian climate of the immediate post-war period. So many traditions and institutions had been swept away, and a storm of fury and disrespect was shaking the foundations of those that had survived. *To Let* showed 'those Victorian ashes scattered'.[3]

Another reason for *The Forsyte Saga* finding favour in 1922 was the way it jumped from 1901 to 1920, passing over the sombre war years in silence. People were only too pleased to forget them; like the author himself, they took a hidden delight, in fact, in renewing links with the past. The Victorian age was, of course, an object of mockery; but it was also regarded with curiosity and a peculiar pride. It was so reassuring to linger over the sense of confidence, strength and tranquillity that had arisen from a supremacy which had now vanished. Satire and nostalgia were, or appeared to be, blended in just the right proportions to nurture self-esteem and sensitivity. A people whose placid ways had been disrupted by war longed, despite momentary querulousness, to regain its self-confidence, reassert its identity, understand itself better. *To Let* managed to combine contact with the present and continuity with the past.

So it is easy to understand how attitudes crystallised in the minds of many English people in the twenties. They recognised the society Galsworthy was writing about, and identified it with the society they came from. War years tend to seem longer than they really are, and Victorian England was already remote in 1922. But the most characteristic features of the Victorian age were still present in people's memories. The remembered words of a grandfather, or an old aunt's ways, were enough. They stood surely for the accuracy of the novelist's portraiture, like the nail on which a painting is hung.

Individuals who were in their youth in 1922 spoke to me of the

Forsyte novels in such terms: 'That is why this great work had such a grip on us. It was through Galsworthy that we knew about Victorian England.' Some went further: 'We are indebted to him, not only for a picture of a past age. He gave us a feeling of what England itself was like then.'

Without intending to produce an historical work, he had tried to hold a mirror up to his country. And devoted public acclaim was indeed more than merited by the serious, conscientious and humble way he went about this task. The Forsyte Chronicles owed some of their influence, even authority, to their vast proportions. Neither before nor after their success did any of the eleven novels not belonging to the trilogies enjoy any comparable reputation. Despite their intrinsic merits, some of them have never been properly appreciated by the public.

While Galsworthy was first laboriously, then, during the last ten years of his life, effortlessly, achieving fame and fortune, his reputation in intellectual and literary circles was moving in the opposite direction. The moment when there was a change of heart towards him, when he ceased to be regarded as an avant-garde writer (or at least, considering how difficult it would be to define 'avant-garde' at that time, the moment when certain writers and critics stopped being interested in him), can be determined fairly precisely: around 1912. As he wrote in a letter to his friend and former adviser, Edward Garnett, in August 1913: 'I saw Conrad three weeks ago; we agreed that it was natural you should take no real interest in our productions because of our beastly success.'[4] It had been several years since Garnett had stopped reviewing Galsworthy's books in literary periodicals.

All this was fairly close to December 1910, defined by Virginia Woolf as the precise moment when a change occurred in human nature, sounding the knell of the three 'Edwardians', Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy, and inaugurating the 'Georgian' age. The date she chose is certainly historically significant, though as a demarcation line in the literary career of Gálsworthy it is only partly valid. In some ways, his later works were still stoutly opposed to generally held opinions. It was in 1919, in the article entitled 'Modern Fiction' in *The Common Reader*, and in a lecture she gave in Cambridge in 1924, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', that Virginia Woolf made known her opinion of Galsworthy. She saw the change that occurred in December 1910 as a new interest by authors in the individual. The 'Edwardians' were not interested in

their characters, but in external factors such as environment, social conventions, prospects or utopia.[5] Her husband, Leonard Woolf, had joined the Fabian Society in 1916, and taken part in Labour Party activities, and his opinion must have carried considerable weight with Virginia.

In 1927, D. H. Lawrence, undaunted by his lack of knowledge of the subject,[6] wrote an article on 'John Galsworthy', which was published the following year.[7] He also perceived a change within the general historical situation, though his dates differed from Virginia Woolf. He saw the present as a period of 'collapse', with the individual imprisoned within the psychology of his social being, and losing his freedom: 'The story is feeble, the characters have no blood and bones, the emotions are faked, faked, faked. It is one great fake.'[8]

This attack was far more damaging to Galsworthy's reputation than Virginia Woolf's rather hasty judgements.[9] It was more detailed, and far more penetrating. It contained more truth, as well as exaggeration. What made the onslaught so effective was that it was no isolated manifestation of hostility. F. R. Leavis, founder and editor of the magazine *Scrutiny* (1932–53) did not, as far as is known, intervene directly; convinced as he was that Lawrence was 'the best literary critic of our age',[10] he probably felt it unnecessary to add anything. The attitude of the 'Leavisites' has weighed heavily on Galsworthy's reputation.[11]

He was already being treated with scorn in his own lifetime. How many sheeplike critics simply followed the ideas of Virginia Woolf and Lawrence, repeating and embroidering on them year after year? As Angus Wilson pointed out to me, no major English critic has devoted any serious study to the author of *The Forsyte Saga*.

Unfortunately, he also laid himself open to political attack. His last six novels, forming the second and third trilogies, *A Modern Comedy* and *End of the Chapter*, contained real or apparent signs that he was turning to the conservative attitudes he had so savagely attacked earlier in his career. I hope my analysis will show that in fact he remained as sensitive as ever to the fate of society's victims. His other forms of writing also confirm that he remained true to his convictions and philosophy, which were, in some respects, radical to the end. Nevertheless, politics demands choices, which was exactly what he would or could not bring himself to make. When he showed some indulgence in describing London drawing-room

society, or grieved over the lot of the rural gentry, he was unaware of the risks he was taking. In some cases it is not inaccurate to talk of betrayal.

The *Saturday Review*, which had been founded by liberals, was constantly hostile to him. The much more moderate antagonism of The *New Statesman and Nation*, the magazine of the Labour Party intellectuals, in which Leonard Woolf wrote, was more serious and regrettable. The leading liberal daily, the *Manchester Guardian*, had reservations, despite Galsworthy's connections with it. D. H. Lawrence added some political arms to the weaponry. His 1928 article criticised Galsworthy for being class-conscious, and he talked of prostitution to property.[12]

All this was unfair for a man whose generosity, including generosity of spirit, was seldom equalled. But it was perhaps an inevitable fate for the author of the Forsyte Chronicles. Can any writer devote himself, in his greatest work, to the meticulous, scrupulous and even nostalgic depiction of the past, without in the end becoming identified with it? So for the English, Galsworthy represents the past, because they are so conscious of all that is anachronistic in the world he describes, and of how fast it is all changing.

It is different for foreigners. They are quite aware that the Forsytes are old-fashioned, because the middle classes in most countries have moved along parallel lines. But they are much better at perceiving what remains true in Galsworthy's depiction of England, because they realise how slowly it has changed. Where else in Europe is it still almost impossible to go to the theatre on a Sunday?

The thirties and forties were years of purgatory and oblivion for Galsworthy. The fifties saw growing signs of his rehabilitation. A handsome illustrated edition of *The Forsyte Saga* was published in 1950, and its success was no fluke of literary fortune. It confirmed increasing public curiosity about Victorian literature and history. At the same time, several critics made so bold as to write articles favourable to Galsworthy.[13] Critical studies, variable in quality, appeared from 1956, showing that public indifference had ended. The first two studies of any real scholarly value, Asher Boldon Wilson's *John Galsworthy's Letters to Leon Lion*, and William Bellamy's *The Novels of Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy: 1890–1910*, were published in 1968 and 1971.

The year 1967 was the centenary of Galsworthy's birth. It was

celebrated with resounding and quite unexpected success by the BBC, which produced a 26-hour long serialisation of the Forsyte Chronicles, at that time the most costly television production ever made. Soames and the other Forsytes first appeared on television screens on 7 January 1967, and continued to do so every Saturday evening until 1 July. Public reaction was so overwhelming that, by general demand, the serial was repeated from 8 September 1968 to 2 March 1969. Simultaneously, sales of Galsworthy's novels in Britain rose to levels never reached during his lifetime. And with more than forty countries (including the Soviet Union) buying the BBC film, new translations or large new editions brought him a vast new public. The scale of the success showed how wrong were those who had proclaimed him dead and buried.

Some critics have refused to back down. Since they cannot deny Galsworthy's fresh popularity, they claim that it is ill-founded, and maintain their own indifference. However, Galsworthy's literary fame seems to be assured of a long future.

Part I

Galsworthy the Man