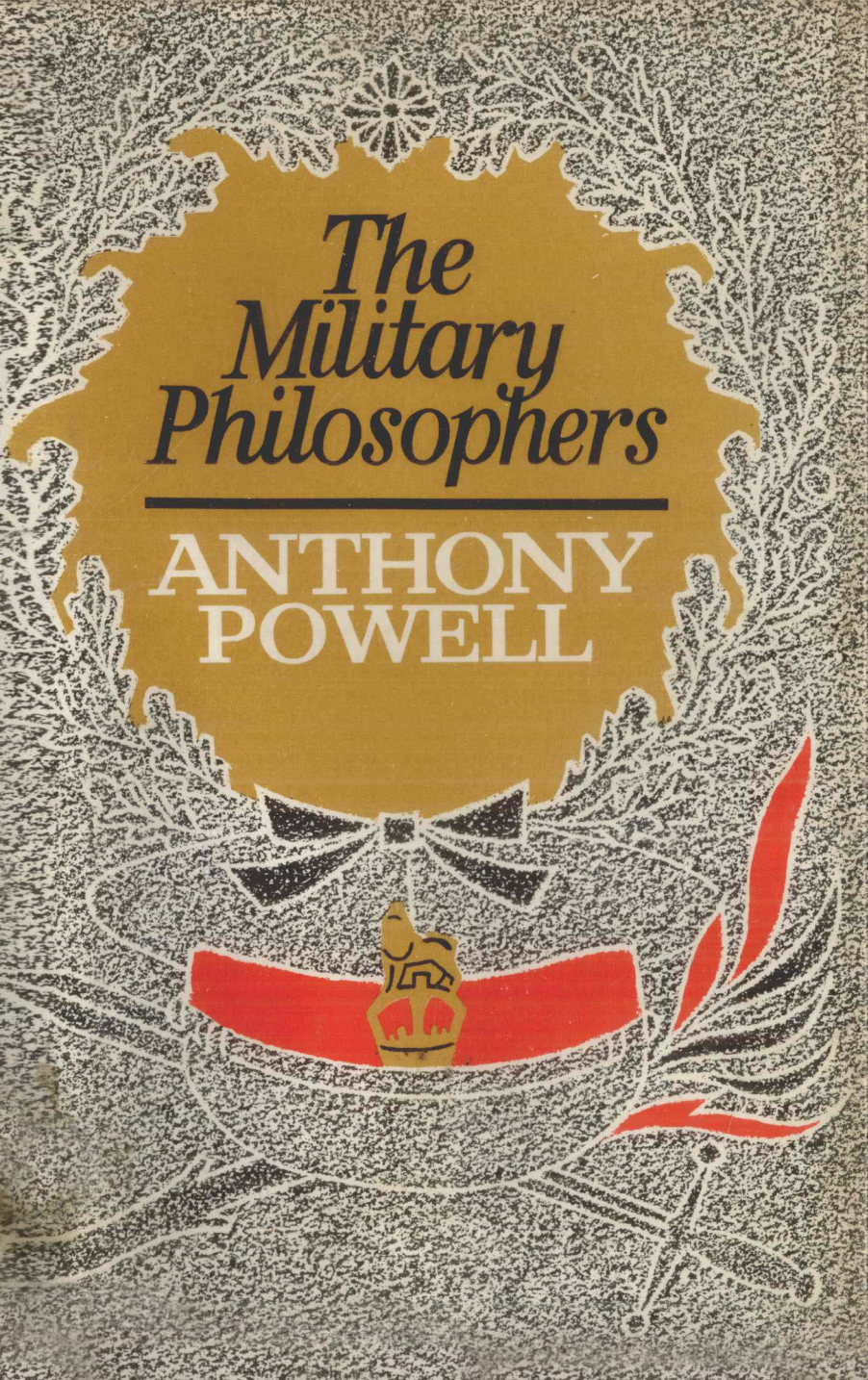


The Military Philosophers

ANTHONY
POWELL



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THE MILITARY
PHILOSOPHERS

A NOVEL



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THE MUSIC OF TIME

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THE MILITARY PHILOSOPHERS

BOOKS BY
ANTHONY POWELL

NOVELS

Afternoon Men

Venusberg

From a View to a Death

Agents and Patients

What's Become of Waring

THE MUSIC OF TIME

A Question of Upbringing

A Buyer's Market

The Acceptance World

At Lady Molly's

Casanova's Chinese Restaurant

The Kindly Ones

The Valley of Bones

The Soldier's Art

The Military Philosophers

GENERAL

John Aubrey and his Friends

*Brief Lives: and other Selected Writings
of John Aubrey*

for
Georgina

THE MUSIC OF TIME

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1

TOWARDS MORNING THE TELEPRINTER'S BELL sounded. A whole night could pass without a summons of that sort, for here, unlike the formations, was no responsibility to wake at four and take dictation—some brief unidentifiable passage of on the whole undistinguished prose—from the secret radio *Spider*, calling and testing in the small hours. Sleep was perfectly attainable when no raid intervened, though recurrent vibration from one or both machines affirmed next door the same restlessness of spirit that agitated the Duty Officer's room, buzzing all the time with desultory currents of feeling bequeathed by an ever changing tenancy. Endemic as ghouls in an Arabian cemetery, harassed aggressive shades lingered for ever in such cells to impose on each successive inmate their preoccupations and anxieties, crowding him from floor and bed, invading and distorting dreams. Once in a way a teleprinter would break down, suddenly ceasing to belch forth its broad paper shaft, the column instead crumpling to a stop in mid-air like waters of a frozen cataract. Jammed works might at this moment account for the call. More probably the bell signified an item of news that could demand immediate action. I went through to investigate.

Grey untidy typescript capitals registered the information that small detachments of Poles were crossing the Russian

frontier into Iran, just a few men at a time, but enough to suggest some sort of evacuation had begun. This was very much our concern. It had been long awaited. My first thought was to ring Colonel Finn at once at his flat, but, reconsidering matters, day nearly come, a copy of the cable would be on his desk when he arrived in a few hours' time. Nothing effective could be done until consultations had taken place. Besides, working late the night before—past eleven when last seen heavily descending the stairs with the tread of Regulus returning to Carthage—Finn deserved any repose he could get. I returned to bed. The teleprinters continued to clatter out their incantations, sullen and monotonous, yet not without a threat of sudden uncontrolled frenzy. However, shattered fragments of sleep were no longer to be reconstituted. After a while attempt had to be abandoned, the day faced. On the way to shave I paused in the room of the Section handling incoming signals. For the tour of duty one came under orders, whatever his rank, of their officer in charge for any given period, on this occasion a near-midget, middle-aged and two-pipped, with long arms and short legs attached to a squat frame, who had exacted regulation rights—waived by the easy-going—to assistance in his postal deliveries the evening before. As he had hurried fretfully down the long dark passages, apportioning hot news to swell the in-trays at break of day, he seemed one of the throng from the Goblin Market. Now, opening the door of their room, identification was more precise. The curtain had obviously just risen on the third drama of *The Ring*—Mime at his forge—the wizened lieutenant revealed in his shirtsleeves, crouched over a table, while he scoured away at some object in an absolute fever of energy.

'Good morning.'

There was no concealing a certain peevishness at interruption of the performance at such a crucial juncture, only a

matter of seconds before the burst of guttural tenor notes opened the introductory lament:

‘Labour unending
Toil without fruit!
The strongest sword
That ever I forged . . .’

However, he discontinued his thankless task for a brief space, though still clutching the polishing cloth in claw-like fingers. It was not, in fact, Siegfried’s sword to which he was devoting so much attention (trading with the enemy, when one came to think of it), but that by now almost universally adopted—possibly Moghul—contribution to military tailoring, the Sam Browne belt, doubtless his own, the unbuckled brace of which waited treatment on another table.

‘Can I see the cable about Poles leaving the USSR?’

The distribution marked at the foot would provide a forecast of immediate contacts on the subject. Rather grudgingly producing the night’s harvest, he held the sheaf of telegrams close to his chest, like the cards of a cautious poker player, so that, as he thumbed them through, no other eye should violate their security. The required copy was at the bottom of the pile. Recipients noted, we had a further word together on the subject of the building’s least uninviting washing place, agreeing in principle that no great diversity of choice was available. Shaking his head despairingly, either at the thought of rows of grubby basins or his own incessant frustration as swordsmith, or rather leather worker, Mime returned to the Sam Browne. The door closed on sempiternal burnishings. Outside in the corridor, diffused in clouds by the brooms of the cleaners’ dawn patrol and smarting to the eye like pepper, rose the dust of eld. Messengers in shabby blue uniforms, a race churlish almost to a man, were beginning to shuffle about,

yawning and snarling at each other. Theoretically, night duty continued until 9 a.m., but the Nibelung allowing fealty to himself and his clan by now sufficiently discharged, I dressed, and, not sorry to be released once again from this recurrent nocturnal vassalage, went out to find some breakfast. As well as stimulating teleprinter news, there were things to think over that had happened the previous day.

An unfriendly sky brooded over lines of overcrowded buses lumbering up Whitehall. Singapore had fallen five or six weeks before. Because of official apprehension of a lowering effect on public morale, Japanese excesses there had been soft-pedalled, though those in touch with documents of only relatively restricted circulation knew the sort of thing that had been going on. Withdrawal in Burma was about to take shape. In London the blitz, on the whole abated, would from time to time break out again like an incurable disease. The news about the Poles being at last allowed to leave Russia was good. Something cheering was welcome. The matter had particular bearing on my own changed circumstances.

Nine or ten months before, a posting had come to a small, rather closed community of the General Staff, the Section's establishment—including Finn himself, a lieutenant-colonel—something less than a dozen officers. Gazetted captain, after a brief period of probation, I had been transferred to the Intelligence Corps 'for purposes of administrative convenience'. Like most of those who could claim an earlier military incarnation, I continued to wear the badges, deemed for no particular reason to carry an enhanced prestige, of my former line regiment. Pennistone, for example, recently promoted major, would not even abandon his anonymous lion-and-unicorn under which he had first entered the army. I was Pennistone's assistant in Polish Liaison. The rest of the Section were concerned either with the other original Allies—Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Norway,

Czechoslovakia—or the Neutrals—some of whom from time to time were metamorphosed into Allies or enemies—running to nearly twenty in number who boasted a military attaché.

A military attaché was the essential point. He provided the channel through which work was routed for all but three of the Allied forces. Exceptions were the Free French, the Americans, the Russians. Only matters innate to the particular appointment of military attaché as such—routine invitations to exercises and the like—involved Finn with this trio. They were, for their part, dealt with by special missions: Americans and Russians, on account of sheer volume of work involved; Free French, for the good reason they lacked an embassy to which a military attaché could be attached. The Vichy administration, unlike German-established puppet regimes in other occupied countries, was still recognized by Great Britain as the government of France, though naturally unrepresented diplomatically at the Court of St James's. Pennistone had explained much of this when we met a year before at the Free French Mission itself, where Finn, then a major, had interviewed me for a job to which I was not appointed. That interview had in due course brought me to the Section, though whether it would have done so had not Finn himself decided to accept the promotion he had so often in the past refused is another matter. Pennistone might have got me into the Section anyway. There seems no avoiding what has to be.

'Finn's good nature makes him vulnerable,' Pennistone said. 'But he can always fall back on his deafness and his VC.'

Finn was certainly prepared to use either or both these attributes to their fullest advantage when occasion required, but he had other weapons too, and took a lot of bypassing when it came to conflict. Quite why he had changed his mind about accepting promotion, no one knew. If, until

that moment, he had preferred to avoid at his age (what that age was remained one of his secrets) too heavy responsibilities, too complex duties, he now found himself assailed by work as various as it was demanding. There was perhaps a parallel with Lance-Corporal Gittins, storeman in my former Battalion, a man of similarly marked character, who, no doubt to the end, preferred a job he liked and knew thoroughly to the uncertainty of rising higher. Possibly a surface picturesqueness about the duties, the people with whom he was now brought in contact, had tempted Finn more than he would have admitted. That would be easy, for Finn admitted to nothing but the deafness and the VC; not even the 'L' of his own initial, though he would smile if the latter question arose, as if he looked forward one day to revealing his first name at the most effective possible moment.

'Finn's extraordinary French is quite famous in Paris,' said Pennistone. 'He has turned it to great advantage.'

Pennistone, capable, even brilliant, at explaining philosophic niceties or the minutiae of official dialectic, was entirely unable to present a clear narrative of his own daily life, past or present, so that it was never discoverable how he and Finn had met in Paris in the first instance. Probably it had been in the days before Pennistone had abandoned commerce for writing a book about Descartes—or possibly Gassendi—and there had been some question of furnishing Finn's office with Pennistone's textiles. In peace or war, Finn was obviously shrewd enough, so he might have ferreted out Pennistone as assistant even had he not been already one of the Section's officers, but, on the contrary, concealed in the innermost recesses of the military machine. He enjoyed a decided prominence in Finn's councils, not by any means only because he spoke several languages with complete fluency.

'Why did Finn leave the City for the cosmetics business?'

‘Didn’t he inherit some family interest? I don’t know. His daughter is married to a Frenchman serving with the British army—as a few are on account of political disinclinations regarding de Gaulle—but Finn keeps his wife and family hidden away.’

‘Why is that?’

Pennistone laughed.

‘My theory is because presence of relations, whatever they were like, would prejudice Finn’s own operation as a completely uncommitted individual, a kind of ideal figure—anyway to himself in his own particular genre—one to whom such appendages as wives and children could only be an encumbrance. Narcissism, perhaps the best sort of narcissism. I’m not sure he isn’t right to do so.’

I saw what Pennistone meant, also why he and Finn got on so well together, at first sight surprising, since Finn had probably never heard of Descartes, still less Gassendi. He was not a great reader, he used to say. Such panache as he felt required by his own chosen persona had immense finish of style, to which even the most critical could hardly take offence. Possibly Mrs Finn had proved the exception in that respect, lack of harmony in domestic life resulting. Heroes are notoriously hard to live with. When Finn conversed about matters other than official ones, he tended on the whole to offer anecdotal experiences of the earlier war, old favourites like the occasion when, during a halt on the line of march, he had persuaded the Medical Officer to pull a troublesome molar. Copious draughts of rum were followed by the convulsions as of earthquake. Finn would make appropriate gestures and mimings during the recital, quite horrifying in their way, and undeniably confirming latent abilities as an actor. The climax came almost in a whisper.

‘The MO made a balls of it. The tooth was the wrong one.’

Had Finn, in fact, chosen the stage as career, rather than

war and commerce, his personal appearance would have restricted him to 'character' parts. Superficial good looks were entirely absent. Short, square, cleanshaven, his head seemed carved out of an elephant's tusk, the whole massive cone of ivory left more or less complete in its original shape, eyes hollowed out deep in the roots, the rest of the protuberance accommodating his other features, terminating in a perfectly colossal nose that stretched directly forward from the totally bald cranium. The nose was preposterous, grotesque, slapstick, a mask from a Goldoni comedy. He had summoned me a day or two before the teleprinter news of the Polish evacuation.

'As David's still in Scotland,' he said. 'I want you to attend a Cabinet Offices meeting. Explain to them how one Polish general can be a very different cup of tea to another.'

The Poles were by far the largest of the Allied contingents in the United Kingdom, running to a Corps of some twenty thousand men, stationed in Scotland, where Pennistone was doing a week's tour of duty to see the army on the ground and make contact with the British Liaison Headquarters attached to it. The other Allies in this country mustered only two or three thousand bodies apiece, though some of them held cards just as useful as soldiers, if not more so: the Belgians, for example, still controlling the Congo, the Norwegians a large and serviceable merchant fleet. However, the size of the Polish Corps, and the fact that the Poles who had reached this country showed a high proportion of officers to that of 'other ranks', inclined to emphasise complexities of Polish political opinion. Some of our own official elements were not too well versed in appreciating the importance of this tricky aspect of all Allied relationships. At misunderstanding's worst, most disastrous, the Poles were thought of as a race not unlike the Russians; indeed, by some, scarcely to be distinguished apart. Even branches more at home in this respect than the

Censorship—to whom it always came as a complete and chaotic surprise that Poles wrote letters to each other expressing feelings towards the USSR that were less than friendly—were sometimes puzzled by internal Allied conflicts alien to our own, in many respects unusual, ideas about running an army.

‘The Poles themselves have a joke about their generals being either social or socialist,’ said Finn. ‘Only wish it was as easy as that. I expect you’ve got the necessary stuff, Nicholas. If you feel you want to strengthen it, apply to the Country Section or our ambassador to them. This is one of Widmerpool’s committees. Have you heard of Widmerpool?’

‘Yes, sir, I——’

‘Had dealings with him?’

‘Quite often, I——’

‘Some people find him . . .’

Finn paused and looked grave. He must have decided to remain imprecise, because he did not finish the sentence.

‘Very active is Widmerpool,’ he went on. ‘Not everyone likes him—I mean where he is. If you’ve come across him already, you’ll know how to handle things. Have all the information at your finger tips. Plenty of notes to fall back on. We want to deliver the goods. Possibly Farebrother will be there. He has certain dealings with the Poles in these secret games that take place. Farebrother’s got great charm, I know, but you must resist it, Nicholas. Don’t let him entangle us in any of his people’s goings-on.’

‘No, sir. Of course not. Is it Colonel Widmerpool?’

‘He’s a half-colonel—Good God, I’ve been keeping Hlava waiting all this time. He must come up at once. You’d better ring David in Scotland and tell him you’re standing in for him at this Cabinet Office meeting. He may have something to add. Make a good impression, Nicholas. Show them we know our business.’

The fact was Finn was rather overawed by the thought of the Cabinet Offices. I was a little overawed myself. The warning about Farebrother, whose name I had already heard mentioned several times as a lieutenant-colonel in one of the secret organizations, expressed a principle of Finn's, almost an obsession, that his own Section should have as distant relations as possible with any of the undercover centres of warfare. He considered, no doubt with reason, that officers concerned in normal liaison duties, if they swam, even had an occasional dip, in waters tainted by the varied and dubious currents liable to be released, sometimes rather recklessly, from such dark and mysterious sources, risked undermining confidence in themselves *vis-à-vis* the Allies with whom they daily worked. Secret machinations of the most outlandish kind might be demanded by total war; they were all the same to be avoided—from the security point of view and every other—by those doing a different sort of job. That was Finn's view. You could take it or leave it as a theory. For his own staff, it had to be observed. All contact with clandestine bodies could not, of course, be prevented, because, where any given Ally was concerned, common areas of administration were bound to exist between routine duties and exceptional ones; for example, transfer of individual or group in circumstances when the change had to be known to the Liaison Officer. Even so, Finn's Section saw on the whole remarkably little of those tenebrous side-turnings off the main road of military operations, and he himself would always give a glance of the deepest disapproval if he ran across any of their representatives, male or female, in uniform or *en civile*, frequenting our room, which did occasionally happen.

The meeting was to take place in one of the large buildings at the Parliament Square end of Whitehall. I had set off there the previous morning, aware of certain trepidations. After the usual security guards at the entrance, Royal