The Four Winds of Love

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WRITING to his publisher Newman Flower on 3 July 1932, Sir Compton Mackenzie revealed that he was planning a new 'very long novel'. It would 'consist of four love stories and four philosophies of love and four decades of a man's life', and would probably run to more than 200,000 words.

In the event *The Four Winds of Love* ran to nearly a million words and was published in instalments between 1937 and 1944. Complex in design and teeming with ideas, it is perhaps the author's greatest achievement as a novelist, and certainly the most likely to stand the test of time in company with *Sinister Street*; yet it seems somehow to have failed to win the recognition of both the critics and the public in the measure one would expect. But there can be little doubt about its quality in the minds of those who know the novel. This chronicle of John Pendarves Ogilvie's life as he grows from youth to manhood and maturity in the first forty years of our century is clearly a masterpiece from the pen of one to whom Henry James once wrote 'You have the best gift that any writer of novels can have, which is the ability to receive the direct impact of life so that you can return it directly to your readers'. The immediacy with which the changing social, artistic and political scene is presented; the way in which all this is interwoven with the story of John Ogilvie, his family and his friends; and the whole organization of the scale and sweep of the novel, represent a triumph of the craft of fiction. Yet *The Four Winds of Love* remains a neglected masterpiece.

There are several reasons why this is so; and they are by no means all literary or artistic reasons. For one thing, the publication plans for the novel were disrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War and the economics of war-time book production. For another, the author himself was deeply affected by the political and economic developments of the years leading up to and in to the

war: to the difficulties of arranging contracts which would support him financially during the composition of his long novel were added his indignation at the political handling of the events which culminated in the abdication (and which led to his turning aside to write *The Windsor Tapestry*), his exasperation with the neckfast complacency of so many politicians and other exercisers of power and influence in public life at that time, and, one guesses, his fears for the ultimate survival of that civilization whose best values he consistently defends.

The resultant set-backs in both the writing and the publication of *The Four Winds of Love* have no doubt had their effect on the novel's reception. Although the earlier volumes were well-noticed by book reviewers and at some length, later volumes were of necessity treated curtly when newsprint was strictly rationed; and when the completed work was finally before the public no reviewer had the space, even if he had the inclination or the time, to survey the whole novel with the amplitude which was its due. The general reading public too found the irregular publication schedule of the novel coupled with its sheer size unhelpful. Its experience of the *roman chronique* was at that time limited as it no longer is today, when the volumes of both Anthony Powell's and C. P. Snow's novel-sequences have been making their regular periodic impact. What is more, for many readers it was limited mainly to historical costume tushery of the *Rogue Herries* kind; and the few who had discovered Proust's great novel were not necessarily likely to feel the same sympathy for *The Four Winds of Love* as for the protracted mood of neurasthenic sensitivity in the pages of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. For if *The Four Winds of Love* is conspicuous for the author's delicate and sensitive handling of emotional experience, it is even more conspicuous for its firm and lucid handling of intellectual and spiritual experience. It is essentially a novel of ideas; and this may be one of the reasons why it has failed to find popular favour. The effort required of the reader confronted with a really long and complex novel is very great. When that novel is concerned with ideas and is itself crammed with a plethora of challenging ones, the response of the mentally lazy is almost bound to be inadequate. For those who make the effort, however, the rewards can be rich. But *The Four Winds of Love* was perhaps not originally intended to

be so complex and demanding a work for both reader and author.

There is evidence that Compton Mackenzie's own plans for the novel's design were considerably modified between its conception as outlined to Newman Flower and the execution of the first volume, *The East Wind of Love*. In a dedicatory letter to Eric Linklater he refers to his notion that

> it would be a long novel, but not too long to be published in a single volume. When I sat down to weave the various themes into a whole it was soon apparent that the book would be twice as long as I had supposed; but after working at it for some six months I was at last compelled to recognize that if the task I had set myself was to be completed without shirking, the book would be four times the length anticipated while it was just floating about agreeably in my fancy.

The four decades of the novel's span remain in the final product, although the author moved the *North Wind*'s time-span of action forward from the original 1926–34 to cover the period 1931–7. But to the four love stories involving John Ogilvie, the novel's protagonist, have been added those of other characters in the cast of the greatly extended novel; and who now can say what are the four philosophies of love which the novel explores? Adolescent love; romantic love; physical passion; the love which leads to marriage and family? Or human love; love of place and race; love of music; and love of God? The enlargement of the original concept seems to have moved far beyond affairs of the heart to encompass also affairs of the mind and of the soul. We are no longer in the presence merely of an *éducation sentimentale,* but of a work of much higher moral ambition and import. It is also a work of high artistic ambition, written by a novelist in the full maturity of his powers. The craftsmanship and technical mastery with which he shapes his material may not be immediately obvious to the reader, so deft and light is his touch; yet for example he introduces the principal continuing themes within the first dozen of nearly 3,000 pages, and the principal characters (insofar as they exist in the opening year of the chronicle) within the first fifty.

What then are these themes and who are the principal characters? A rehearsal of the story of four loves and four decades is

perhaps necessary for those whose acquaintance with the novel is sketchy or has fallen into disrepair.

The Four Winds of Love concerns the progress of John Pendarves Ogilvie, son of a seemingly remote, rather inhibited barrister of Scottish descent and his now dead Cornish wife, from the age of 17 in the last year of Queen Victoria's reign to the age of 54. We first meet him as a youth bored by the tedium of the prolonged adolescent servitude of the English public-school system and by the oppressive sense of security which, strange though it may seem today, affected intelligent young people at the end of that era. Fortunately John Ogilvie is able to make his escape towards adventure in the adult world when his father re-marries, taking a wife much younger than himself, Elise, and sends him first abroad (where he gambles away his money and has to be ignominiously retrieved) and then to a crammer's in the country where he is commissioned into a Volunteer regiment. We are introduced also to his schoolfriends Edward Fitzgerald, the Irish Catholic and nationalist; Emil Stern, the intellectual Jewish boy whose brother Julius is a musical child-prodigy; and their widowed mother Miriam Stern, in whom John Ogilvie recognizes the comprehending quality of motherhood and love which has been missing in his life. He becomes an intimate of the family and makes of Miriam Stern his confidante: she in turn educates his taste in music, the arts, and the pleasures of intellectual debate; introduces him to travel in France and Poland with her children; and with her wisdom, experience and sensitivity helps to develop his sentimental and emotional education — a role in which she will continue to be his confidante throughout his life.

In the first volume we encounter also the first of the major love stories and philosophies of love, set however in a more richly developed context than would seem to have been envisaged in the author's original plan. For there are delicately managed passages which deal with the often hardly conscious admirations and infatuations of schoolboys for school heroes; with the first stirrings of interest in the opposite sex; with the quickening of lust and the confusions of sexual shame; with the loss of physical virginity and its emotional consequences. And we are told the story of how John Ogilvie and Rose Medlicott, the daughter of a fox-hunting landed gentleman, fell romantically in love, in love

at first sight; of how John and Rose pledged themselves to marry; and how this romantic, immature and defenceless love could not withstand the pressures and the power of the society which saw its frail blossoming. From the heartbreak of its collapse John learns a lesson in reality; and like a benison on that lesson falls the mature expression of the love of John and Miriam fulfilled one night in Cracow and sublimated thereafter in a friendship of perfect sympathy and mutual trust. For Miriam the east wind has been a 'wind at summer's end which will wither all the late roses, not' — as for John — 'an east wind of May which shrivels the blossom but leaves the fruit to set'. But for John the south wind of love begins to blow, and we meet him next in 1912 seven years after he has gone down from Oxford and after he has established himself as a young and successful playwright.

The second volume of *The Four Winds of Love* introduces the next love story, of John Ogilvie and Gabrielle Derozier, the French actress who in the leading role of his play *Annette* has brought him fame as a dramatist. Gabrielle is worldly-wise, mature, and dedicated to her professional career. Her affaire with John is an adult education — sensual, generous, not lacking in emotion and exhilaration and even in moments of normal human jealousy, but essentially honest, tolerant and civilized. We are introduced to the affaire in Italy when it has almost run its course and see John and Gabrielle's relationship grow eventually in later episodes from *l'amour* to *l'amitié*. But *The South Wind of Love* brings us also to the First World War and John Ogilvie's plunge into a life of action as a Naval Intelligence Officer in the Aegean, an experience whose intellectual, emotional and physical demands occupy him totally for a time and indeed exhaust his energies. In a brief interlude he meets the poetess Euphrosyne Ladas, the epitome of the Hellenic spirit, and realizes that he could in other circumstances fall in love with her; and in a later interlude of leisure falls in love with the young Zoe Gadrilakis whom he plans to marry, only to lose her when she is drowned at sea through enemy action.

The opening of *The West Wind of Love* is still set in war-time and brings us to the story of John Ogilvie and Athene Langridge, whom we first meet in the *South Wind of Love* as a shy, conventional *femme-vièrge*. She is married to a weak, over-indulged and self-

indulgent American playboy and is almost entirely preoccupied with her baby son. Athene and John have known each other off and on for some six years. Athene herself has been finally shocked into reality and maturity by her husband's behaviour and deceptions, and in this awakening of her personality she falls in love with John, sets about divorcing Wacey Langridge, and on his dying during the influenza epidemic after the war marries John and settles with him in Cornwall where their daughter Corinna is born.

In the fourth volume of the novel, *The North Wind of Love,* this unshakeable and love-encompassed marriage is shattered when Athene dies on a visit to her son in America; but that the marriage had different values for John and for Athene is suggested by the author in the second part of the third volume, which in the first edition was entitled *West to North.* For Athene her marriage and family represent the sum total of reality; for John they are the stable and secure foundation of life on which he can build his other activities, whose developing themes have been interwoven with the love stories throughout the whole novel. But the themes of love continue to provide some of the strands of the novel's fabric up to the very end, as we follow the sympathetic involvement of John and his generation in the renewed patterns of love of their younger relatives — as we see how his half-sister Prudence loses through death the young Italian with whom she has fallen romantically in love and finally marries Noll Erpingham; as we see how Corinna marries Julius's son Sebastian; and as we see how finally John himself marries Euphrosyne Ladas.

But the novel is concerned with much more than these elegant variations on the theme of human love. To borrow a metaphor from yet another theme which runs throughout all four volumes — the meaning of musical experience — *The Four Winds of Love* is a large-scale symphonic work and richly orchestrated. Let us look at its other main themes in their recurrent cyclical relationship and at the ways in which the author deploys them.

His novelistic method is complex. Mainly he relies on a post-Jamesian technique of dramatizing the material, but other techniques are also brought into play. The evolving story is unfolded not in a succession of more or less standard chapter divisions but for the most part in a series of dramatic scenes of

various lengths. Throughout the novel the action is matched to the characters, very much as they reveal themselves in their talk, reflections and correspondence, all of which devices are used within the framework of the novel's construction.

Furthermore, the principal personae are interested in ideas. Much of their time is spent in argument and discussion — a device which allows the author to present in dramatic form greatly enlarged areas and varieties of human response to social, political, emotional, intellectual and religious problems. As a foil to the tone of these dialogues he also presents a large gallery of minor characters of all ages, sexes and nationalities, whose dialogue encompasses every mood from tragedy and the pathetic to broad comedy. A keen sense of speech styles is of course one of Sir Compton Mackenzie's great accomplishments and no doubt partly a hereditary gift — who has better caught the accents of schoolboys aping their elders as they stand each other sundaes; the rhetoric of politicians; the wily blandishments of a Greek in business? — but it remains only one facet of his total ability to see and feel as people of all sorts, ages and conditions see and feel, and to project all this dramatically to his readers. But his facility in the creation of comedy, tragedy and romance are controlled throughout this novel by the operation of his formidable critical intellect and by a sound historical sense; and it is this capacity which has made it possible for him to attempt in this most ambitious of his novels a full assessment of the intellectual life of his chosen period.

One of his solutions to the technical problem of projecting this large vision within the form of the novel is extraordinarily bold. Real events are introduced as well as fictional events; but so also are real persons — de Valera and Cunninghame Graham among them — while other characters (e.g. Daniel Rayner and his wife Hildegarde = the Lawrences) are no more than partially fictionalized. This solution not only allows the author to enlarge once more the range of the ideas he presents but also to reinforce the verisimilitude of his fiction. For those who enjoy the detective work of source-investigation, his autobiographical writings offer a ready-made opportunity for the study of the levels at which a novelist can transmute facts into fiction by the exercise of imagination and a controlling intellect. But like yet another

leit-motif one finds that the major themes of his symphonic novel are all related in that the intellect is exercised ultimately for the disciplining of emotion.

Take for example the theme of religious belief, adumbrated at the outset in the religious persuasions of the Fitzgerald and the Stern families and in the exemption of Fitz and Emil from morning prayers at St James's school. The empty conventionality of so much organized religion; the questing after the meaning of religious experience; problems of doubt and faith; the arguments of believers and non-believers — all these are presented with such vivid force that Jew and Gentile, Christian and atheist, recognize their own responses in the author's pages. But in the summing-up, it is the mindlessness and the muddle-headedness of emotionally-persuaded religionists that fails: John Ogilvie's eventual conversion to the Catholic church must be recognized as essentially an act of intellectual affirmation.

So it is too with the theme of political independence, also introduced at the beginning of the novel in the debate on Irish Home Rule when Fitz denounces alike the Imperialism of the Tory M.P. and the gradualism of the Irish Nationalist Member. Fitz is later to meet his death in the Civil War at the hands of the Free Staters; but the theme of the dissolution of empires and the rights of small nations is frequently recapitulated in such terms as the alliances of the First World War, the aspirations of the Venizelists in Greece, of Zionists, Scottish Nationalists and pan-Celticists, and later in the growing menace of new forms of oppressive power in Fascism and Nazism. In John Ogilvie the ancestral call of Highland race and blood is compelling; but again his final attitude *vis-à-vis* Nationalism in Scotland is one achieved by the play of reason and intellect on the data of experience.

If *The Four Winds of Love* is in its essentials an intellectual novel, however, it is anything but an arid one. On the contrary, its texture is in fact extraordinarily rich and sensuous while the quality of the writing remains deceptively simple.

How well, for instance, Sir Compton conveys the sense of period and place, so that we smell again the sharp herb-tang of the Aegean islands and feel the fierce sun on our skins; sense the tension in the bothy in Ireland as Fitz and the English hostage wait for news of the hangings in Dublin Castle; feel — if only

vicariously — the thrill of riding in a hansom cab with a pretty girl; catch on our own cheeks the flame of the blush on Rose Medlicott's as she stoops to pick up her daffodils.

And how prodigally too he peoples his pages with unforgettably drawn characters — Torquil Macleod of Ardvore and Norman McIver the radical tailor; kind Cissie Oliver with her good intentions and superstitious muddled Catholicism; the British Israelite on the train with his biblical *sortes* and crazy philology; the solemn clarsach-playing women with their genteel travesty of Scottish folk song; lisping Geoffrey Noel and his pathetic integrity and decency; and even such minor figures as the old gardener at the Villa Lo Smeraldo piping platitudinous greetings from the depth of his simple heart.

Towards the end of the dedicatory letter prefixed to *The East Wind of Love* the author wrote: 'Five years of reviewing have left me with a prejudice against very long books, and I shall find it easy to sympathize with critics who groan at the prospect before them. I am hopeful that when the four volumes are published it will be clear that the size of the work was demanded by the design, but whether a design which involves such an accumulation of incident, such an amount of discussion, such a variety of scene, and such a crowd of characters will be approved is another matter, and I confess that I await the final verdict with some anxiety.'

Accumulation of incident and a vast amount of discussion there certainly are in this massive novel; but the variety of the characters and the scenes, the beautifully plotted construction, the author's fertile invention and vital imagination, to one reader at least seem to sustain the whole edifice successfully. Each re-reading yields so much more; and that is surely a reliable test of enduring quality. Written at the very height of his powers, Sir Compton Mackenzie's novel is not only an affirmation of life but, rare enough, an affirmation of reason. In the perspectives of literary history, one might hazard a guess that this comprehensive panorama of an era of radical social change seems likely to come more and more into its own as that era recedes.

Writing to the young John Ogilvie before he went up to Oxford Miriam Stern penned the following words: 'Love, religion, art, politics, philosophy, they are all before you.' The phrase might well stand as an epigraph to *The Four Winds of Love*.