
Anthony Powell 1905-2000 : The Last of the
'Brideshead Generation'

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ANTHONY Powell, who died in March 2000 aged 94¹, was the last survivor of the talented generation of English writers who rose to fame in the inter-War years, a group that included Evelyn Waugh, Cyril Connolly, Graham Greene, George Orwell and Henry Green.

Best known for his 12-volume comic novel *A Dance To the Music of Time*, Powell was a storyteller of great integrity, stylistic originality and clarity of vision, sustained through a writing career spanning nearly 70 years.

It is necessary to return to the age of Jane Austen, Dickens and Trollope to find an English novelist of equivalent seriousness who exerted such a hold on his admirers. Those who fell under the spell of his measured, ironic and morally unflinching vision often claimed to have been changed forever in the process.

In contrast to the above-mentioned contemporaries and friends, who variously exploited the power of the new broadcasting media, Powell declined to project a saleable public personality, or to offer any but the

1 A version of this article appeared as an obituary in *The Scotsman* (Edinburgh), March 26, 2000.

baldest commentary on his own creation, believing that "the less novelists descant on their own works the better"². Consequently he suffered much lazy misrepresentation and academic neglect³, and never achieved spectacular sales.

Nevertheless, in *A Dance To the Music of Time* (London, 1951-1975, hereafter *Dance*) he crafted a vast and resonant comic epic that will stand alongside *Ulysses* and *Remembrance of Things Past* as one of the multifaceted cathedrals of modernist literature.

Anthony Dymoke Powell was born on 21 December 1905, the only child of a military family from the Welsh borders. His father, unflatteringly portrayed in the partly-autobiographical *Dance*, was an irascible army officer, whose "innate fretfulness of spirit"⁴ may provide the key

2 *Infants of the Spring* (London, 1976), p17.

3 For example of the former see Graham Martin, 'Anthony Powell and Angus Wilson' in *The Penguin New History of English Literature, No 8: The Present* (London, 1978), pp193-208, which starts off with the assertion "Powell's social range is narrow and he tends to view change unhistorically." The existing critical literature on Powell is patchy and inadequate, but contains several useful studies: Neil McEwan; *Anthony Powell*; Macmillan, 1991; George Lilley; *Anthony Powell: A Bibliography*; St Paul's Bibliographies, 1994, Robert L Selig; *Time and Anthony Powell: A Critical Study*; Fairleigh Dickinson, 1991; Hilary Spurling; *Invitation to the Dance; A Handbook to Anthony Powell's "Dance to the Music of Time"*; Mandarin Paperbacks, 1992; Neil Brennan; *Anthony Powell*; Twayne (New York), Revised 1995. All are available in the Baiko University library, along with the University of Chicago Press four-volume edition of *A Dance to the Music of Time* itself.

4 *Temporary Kings* (London, 1973) p53. The phrase refers to the narrator's fictional father in *Dance*, not AP's, though Captain Jenkins is barely distinguishable from the portrait Lt. Col. Powell as depicted in his son's memories.

to his son's urbane and uncompromisingly intellectual approach to life and art.

His youth provides few other clues to the writer he would become. A lonely child, with a talent for drawing military uniforms, he was raised in Edwardian London and in various English garrison towns. He attended Eton and Balliol College, Oxford, where he graduated with a third-class degree in history. Always talented at friendship, he formed early relationships that were to serve him well throughout his long and sometimes precarious career as a publisher, author, literary editor and critic.

Some of these friends metamorphosed into characters in *Dance*, though he often complained that readers oversimplified the complex process of turning reality into art. Instead, he captured the idiosyncrasies of this talented generation more historically in his memoirs, *To Keep The Ball Rolling* (1983), which contains indelible character sketches of friends such as Orwell, Connolly, Malcolm Muggeridge and the composer Constant Lambert.

Starting his working life in the publishing firm of Duckworths (where he gave Evelyn Waugh his first book commission), Powell published his first novel, *Afternoon Men*, in 1931. Four more novels were to follow before the Second World War, reflecting a life lived between the Bohemian world of writers, artists and musicians, and the "smart" society. Later leftist-oriented critics would not forgive him for describing debutante dances and cocktail parties in his novels, a peculiarly British reaction with no parallel, say, in France's attitude to the (genuinely snobbish) Marcel Proust, or that of Italian critics to

the aristocratic Guiseppi Lampedusa.

Powell's analysis of the British social hierarchy was always far subtler and more truthful than that many of his politically antagonistic critics would allow. The picture he presents is of dynamic upward and downward mobility and mixture rather than rigid stratification. In any case the intricacies of class formed only a part of a complex, classically inspired vision of human society in which all individuals are seen as equally extraordinary at close range, and all at the mercy of the same mythological "furies".

In 1934 Anthony Powell married Lady Violet Pakenham, daughter of the 5th Earl of Longford, with whom he had two sons. One of them, Tristram Powell, is a distinguished film and TV director. In the Fifties, they moved to Chantry near Frome in Somerset, where he lived the rest of his life.

During the Second World War, Powell served in the Welch Regiment, subsequently the Intelligence Corps, in which he liaised with Polish and French governments in exile and was promoted major by the end of the war. He later wrote that it was the barren stretches of wartime service, and the truths about human nature revealed in the chaos of global conflagration, that planted the idea of an extended novel or *roman de fleuve* in his mind. The elegant 12-volume structure, worked out in the course of 25 years, freed him from the chore of constant fresh starts in new settings, would allow characters to develop in real time, and would give scope for his daring experiments with structure and narrative technique.

Over a million words long, *Dance* contains over 600 characters, only 30 per cent of whom are non-fictional and / or offstage. Following the fortunes of a group of friends and acquaintances over 60 years, it is replete with references to the other arts, particularly painting, Powell's chief passion outside of literature. The title of the sequence is borrowed from a painting by Nicholas Poussin in the Wallace Collection in London⁵.

Wholly original in conception and execution, the landscape of *Dance* embraces the self-referential playfulness of 20th-century postmodernism, encompasses the fragmented viewpoints and mimetic narrative techniques of the early modernist masters James and Conrad, and stretches further back to reflect the unabashed sententiousness and aphorism of the 19th century novel. In this last group Balzac, Stendhal and Dostoevsky were more influential than the English tradition represented by Dickens, Thackeray or Trollope. For someone caricatured as a conservative "little Englander", Powell was a more cosmopolitan artist than, say, Waugh or Orwell. Also, Powell's oft-stated belief that the significance of any art was in its reception by readers rather than at the point of oracular transmission by the writer was a definitively postmodern founding principle.

In the Powellian fictional mix is a vast and eclectic range of intellectual influences, ranging from classical authors, Nietzsche, 17th-century figures such as John Aubrey and Richard Burton, to TS Eliot (whose taste for occult symbolism he shared), F Scott Fitzgerald and,

5 A Dance to the Music of Time (*Il Ballo della Vita Humana*) c1639-40 by Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665).

above all, Marcel Proust.

Often hilariously funny, sometimes chilling, and always intoxicatingly readable, *Dance* is above all a triumph of technical realism. Powell imbued his characters with abundant life outside of the text, perhaps the highest test of any creative writer.

Chief exhibit here is Widmerpool, the clownish but sinister Man of Will. Intended by Powell as one major character among several⁶, he grew into one of the grotesque icons of modern literature.

Anthony Powell was dedicated to creating humanist comedy from the chaos and horror of the 20th century, and transgressed accepted genre rules with Shakespearean daring. The smooth shell of his writing conceals a massive and complex effort of imagination and synthesis. Deep Welsh melancholy was the root of his desire to entertain, in person and in print.

After the completion of *Dance*, he wrote two other novels, *Oh, How The Wheel Becomes It!* (1983), and *The Fisher King* (1986). There were also two brilliant collections of literary criticism, *Miscellaneous Verdicts* (1990) and *Under Review* (1992), full of penetrating insights and a bracing disregard for received critical ideas.

Three volumes of revealing *Journals* would also appear in the late Nineties, recording with acuteness and asperity the visits of the many

6 Private communication with the author during interview at Chantry, Somerset 29th May 1992.

Powell addicts; fellow-writers, painters, journalists, politicians and the often bizarre army of “fans” from all walks of life who made the pilgrimage to his elegantly dilapidated Regency villa. He did not shrink from literary spats, persuasively attacked established reputations such as those of Auden, Greene and Nabokov, and, to borrow one of his own phrases, was not in the least afraid of appearing pompous, especially on the subject of genealogy.

One of the major themes of the *Journals* was his long campaign to have *Dance* televised⁷. When this finally occurred in 1997, for Channel 4 TV, the result was disappointing, despite a skilful adaptation by Hugh Whitemore and some excellent acting performances. Constraints on the budget demanded a compression of time that caricatured the book’s weaknesses and failed to convey its idiosyncratic strengths.

The Irish poet Robert Nye once called Anthony Powell “a great artist of the right”⁸. George Orwell called him “the only Tory [political conservative] I have every liked”⁹. Such descriptions place him in a tradition of right wing artistic innovators that includes Dr Johnson, TS Eliot and more recently, Kingsley Amis and VS Naipaul.

Powell turned down a knighthood offered by the Conservative government of Edward Heath in the 1970s, but accepted the more elevated Companionship of Honour offered by the Queen in 1986 at the behest of Mrs Thatcher, a politician whom he greatly admired.

7 For examples, see *Journals 1982-1986* (London, 1995), pp222-223, 225.

8 Quoted in the *Daily Telegraph* (London), March 26th, 2000.

9 Ibid.

Appropriate for a writer who was quick to absorb American fictional influences (ee Cummings and Ernest Hemingway were other favorites), Powell also received several honours in the United States, where his high reputation is less obscured by social antagonisms. The Anthony Powell Society of Kalamazoo, Michigan, was one of several in which members come dressed as their favourite *Dance* character. He is well served in cyberspace by the Anthony Powell fans' website¹⁰ and lively internet discussion group, whose global network of well-assorted subscribers attests to an enduring ability to cross all boundaries.

10 www.anthonypowell.org.uk