Douglas Parmée

Scholar and prolific translator of French and German authors including Flaubert, Fontane, Maupassant, Mérimée, Lenz and Zola.

Douglas Parmée was a lecturer in modern languages at Cambridge - and a fellow of Queens’ College for sixty years – who also became known for the number and quality of his translations. These included *Effi Briest* (Theodor Fontane) and *Bel-Ami* (Guy de Maupassant) for Penguin Classics; *A Sentimental Education* (Gustave Flaubert), *Nana* (Emile Zola) and *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (Choderlos de Laclos) for the Oxford University Press World’s Classics series; and, for Short Books, a selection from the aphorist and epigrammatist Nicolas Chamfort. He also published two anthologies, *Twelve French Poets* (Longman 1957), which became for some years an A-level textbook, and its successor *Fifteen French Poets* (Longman 1974), which did not.

As well as being Director of Studies in French and having various other college jobs in the pluralistic Cambridge way, he spent time at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica and in Barbados and at the University of Western Australia in Perth.

The style of his work can be judged from a review of *Liaisons*, which praised a racy, colloquial and accurate translation, a concise, well-honed, elegant introduction and helpful and informative notes. It was this raciness, allied to his remarkable facility with languages and a relish for the unconventional – perhaps a distaste for the conventional as well – that led him into some of the byways of Francophone literature, including the *crique-craque* tradition of Haitian folk fables, which he would assert were superior to those of La Fontaine, especially to anyone who expressed the opposite view. He went to Papa Doc’s Haiti from Jamaica and became the English expert on Haitian literature, giving talks on the Third Programme. This feeling for *négritude*, though not assumed, gave him further pleasure by the irritation it caused to some. Symbolism and Surrealism were also among his interests, but his true forte was a deep knowledge of and admiration for French novelists of the nineteenth century.

He was born in West Dean in Sussex in 1914 – despite the name, there is no French blood in the family for at least the preceding three hundred years – and was at Simon Langton Boys’ School in Canterbury before his father, an Inspector of Schools, moved to Cambridge and his son entered the Perse School. There he thrived, leaving in 1933 to go up to Trinity College, Cambridge as a teacher training college student, a now non-existent category, spurning an exhibition offered by Downing College. At Trinity he took a first in both parts of the Modern and Medieval Languages Tripos – a starred first in Part II - becoming an exhibitioner in 1934 and a senior scholar in 1935. He left in 1936 to do post-graduate work at the University of Bonn and a doctorate at the Sorbonne. During this time he received various scholarships and studentships from Trinity, including the Dunning in 1938 and the Rouse Ball in 1940.

Although his doctoral thesis - on the symbolist Henri de Régnier - had been completed and indeed published, as was then the rule, he never took the degree, either because the war intervened or, as was sometimes said, in a fit of pique on his part at some Sorbonne functionary's trying to charge a fee which he felt he had already paid. He certainly owned the academic hood.
Back in England, he became Secretary of the Students’ Department in the London office of the British Council from 1939 to 1941. It was in this capacity that he found himself at a lunch for another symbolist poet, Paul Valéry, whose description of the inadequate wine he was offered – “Mais, c’est curieux” – he treasured.

In 1941 he was claimed by RAF Intelligence and then, very naturally, the Government Code & Cypher School at Bletchley Park, where he worked in Hut 3 as part of the team, eventually nearly 600 strong, that translated, analysed and interpreted the decrypts from Hut 6. It was while there that he met and married in 1944 Gwen Hepworth (“Wendy”- he had a habit of using his own versions of names and places), on secondment to Hut 6 from the Foreign Office; his best man was the irascible Glaswegian John Cairncross, later exposed as a spy for the Soviet Union and dubbed the Fifth Man by the press.

After VE Day he was sent to Berlin; he was horrified not only by the condition of the defeated Germans, but by some of their conquerors’ behaviour to them, in particular that of a brother officer who, having agreed the price of a pleasure-boat with its owner’s widow in cigarettes, paid her in Woodbines.

Once again back in England, in 1946 he joined the French department at Cambridge, not long thereafter becoming a fellow of Queens’ College, where he remained until he retired. After the enormous success, noted above, of his anthology Twelve French Poets, he turned to translation. Some indication of his output’s range and extent can be had from observing that, as well as the classics already mentioned, it included Sons of Kings (Les Pléiades) by Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau, the thriller Dossier 51 by Gilles Perrault, eight of the articles in Italian Fascisms from Pareto to Gentile (from the Italian), Rosa Luxemberg, a reappraisal, by Lelio Basso, also from the Italian, The Second World War by Henri Michel (co-awarded the Scott Moncrieff Prize) and An Exemplary Life (Das Vorbild) by Siegfried Lenz, which won an award from the PEN Club of New York.

He enjoyed giving lectures, despite modestly having described that activity as casting false pearls before real swine; his became very popular: perhaps the undergraduates who liked his irreverence and wit were hoping for a repeat of the legendary if not mythical occasion he lectured on Surrealism dressed only in cap, gown and black tights. He was also Steward of his college and on the wine committee, duties from which he derived much pleasure.

He was divorced from his first wife in the early Seventies, soon marrying Meg - Margaret Clarke, then a research student, with whom he went to live in Adelaide, South Australia, after his retirement in 1981, when he was made a life fellow of Queens’. The location, with a very good library and no more than an hour or two’s drive from three significant wine-producing areas, was carefully chosen.

In retirement, with no academic distractions, he worked on his translations harder than ever; with no need for income from them, his tastes for the recondite or undervalued as well as for the classics could be expressed. The new selection from Chamfort gave him particular pleasure, with its uncynical and humorous appreciation of human
nature comparable, he felt, with Montaigne; he also gained great satisfaction from The Child by Jules Vallès, an autobiographical novel dedicated to everyone who was bored at school.

Outside his pursuit of literature as a professional he had an abiding interest in all the arts, being a keen concert-, gallery- and filmgoer. In earlier days he had been fond of the company of convivial wits, having been well-acquainted with, among others, the belligerent critic and boozер John Davenport; Kingsley Amis’s horror when told he would have to teach Conrad amused him particularly. His interest in wine has been mentioned; he had a good palate and was both knowledgeable and experienced. He was widely travelled, both in Europe and outside; in the Fifties and Sixties, the Long Vacation usually saw him leaving Grantchester Meadows to cross the Channel en famille, first in a Vauxhall Velox, then with a Berkeley Cavalier caravan behind his short wheelbase Land Rover or, later, his Austin Westminster. He was not a good driver - and a worse back-seat driver: his adjurations to “keep the revs up” have passed into the family language. He had also been a reckonable tennis and squash player; at school, though not having an especially large or powerful physique, he had set a shot-putting record which stood for many years.

The geographical position of Australia in the Far East led to the development of an interest in the Dao that reflected his own quietist and patient approach to life. As, though tended devotedly by Meg, his health began slowly to decline, this attitude allowed the departure of successive physical faculties to be met not with resignation but with resolution to make the best of what remained.

He is survived by two sons and a daughter of his first marriage and by his second wife and their son.

Douglas Parmée, translator and academic, was born on June 6, 1914. He died in his sleep on August 11, 2008, aged 94.

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