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## **Liberalism and the World circa 1930: Gilbert Murray's *The Ordeal of this Generation***

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In many ways this book captures the strengths of the liberal edifice that was hurriedly erected after the collapse of the old order in 1914-18. Yet within its elegant pages one also detects the cracks that were to grow ever larger and more disconcerting in the years that followed. It combines a robust defence of the League of Nations, a plea for more conscientious application of its Covenant, a cautious treatment of the role of democracy in promoting international order<sup>1</sup>, a sanguine interpretation of the nature and role of the British Empire, all united by a liberal/Aristotelian concern to promote 'the good life for man' defined in terms of increased freedom for the pursuit of virtue. Its author is the classicist and campaigner for peace, Gilbert Murray, an establishment liberal who did not see himself as such despite occupying the Regius Professorship of Greek at Oxford and being a member by marriage of one of the most prominent Whig aristocratic families of England. The book was based upon the Halley Stewart Lectures which Murray delivered in 1928. The Halley Stewart Trust was a Christian educational foundation dedicated to

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<sup>1</sup> Contra Union of Democratic Control accounts. See Martin Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), chs. 7 & 8; Peter Wilson, 'Retrieving Cosmos: Gilbert Murray's Thought on International Relations', in C. Stray (ed.), *Gilbert Murray Reassessed: Hellenism, Theatre, and International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 244-5.

such ideals as ‘the discovery of the best means by which “the mind of Christ” may be applied to extending the Kingdom of God by the prevention and removal of human misery’ and the ‘fostering of good will between all races, tribes, peoples and nations so as to secure the fulfilment of the hope of “peace on earth”’.<sup>2</sup> In the much more secular England of today it is easy to forget just how powerful and pervasive the Christian church and Christian ideals were in Britain before the Second World War. But also how relatively liberal it was—Murray was invited to give the lectures despite his rationalism and atheism being well-known.

The Preface to the volume gives the reader of today a strong clue to the character of Murray’s thinking. It begins:

Profound changes, political, social, economic and intellectual, have taken place during the last fifty years in the environment of civilized man, and it is still doubtful whether or no he will succeed in understanding them and adapting himself to meet them. That is the ‘ordeal’ which forms the subject of these lectures...

The ‘still’ betrays the expectations of a liberal progressive who came of age when the Empire, British commercial strength, and faith in science and reason were at their height. England was the new Athens, and its Commonwealth a new Hellenic civilization—or so Murray and many fellow classically educated liberals liked to wax. The First World War revealed that this great rational,

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<sup>2</sup> Front matter, Gilbert Murray, *The Ordeal of This Generation: The War, The League, and the Future* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1929).

scientific, and commercial civilization had a flaw—at least one big flaw—and ‘progress as normal’ could not resume until it had been dealt with. But Murray and his fellow liberal intellectuals were confident that it would be dealt with, such was their faith in the power of reason to resolve even the most intractable problems. The fact that it had not been, fully, by 1928 provoked surprise; though not yet consternation—time there was still to cure the ills of the international body politic.

‘Understanding and adapting’ to changed conditions reflects the Darwinian character of so much social and political thinking of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By this is meant not ‘social Darwinism’ in its sophisticated (Herbert Spencer), racist (Houston Stewart Chamberlain), or popular (‘survival of the fittest’) forms, but rather the understanding of life, including social life, in terms of evolution and adaptation. There was a tendency to assume objective conditions success in adaptation to which determined which species and groups would survive and prosper and which would struggle and sink. Understanding through careful observation, and the application of mind to experience, was the essential first step in the adaptive process.

Yet ‘the environment of civilized man’ contains further important clues. The nineteenth century habit of looking at the world in terms of the civilized and uncivilized, advanced peoples and backward peoples, pervades this and even subsequent Murray writings. Murray was no white supremacist. His outlook was cultural not socio-biological. Yet he believed that Western culture

was so far in advance of other cultures and so much in the van of humanity that the categories become in effect static, objective, and quasi-biological. By the same token, according to the standards of his day he was no sexist. He was an ardent suffragist, his commitment to the goal of universal adult suffrage being one of the qualities (along with his teetotalism) that attracted his future wife Lady Mary Howard, and her influential mother, the Countess of Carlisle, to him.<sup>3</sup> Yet the social environment which he had in mind was undoubtedly that not of 'Man' but of 'men'—perhaps with the occasional brilliant, or odd, or brilliantly odd and exceptional woman (such as the classicist Jane Harrison, novelist Virginia Woolf, or his League International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC) colleague Madame Curie). Murray's highbrow, elitist, Oxbridge Senior Common Room view of the world was very much that of the privileged, upper-middle-class, expensively educated male that Woolf wrote so penetratingly about in *Three Guineas*.<sup>4</sup> It was a male view all the more unshakeable and irritating for its steadfast commitment to liberal causes, its well-intentioned paternalism, and the sense of public duty (and sometimes moral superiority) that accompanied it.

The subtitle should also not pass brief comment. It expresses, in a beguilingly simple way, an article of faith of the inter-war liberal creed. War was the problem, the League the solution, and the future consisted of refining the latter to more effectively deal with the former—in order to get history back

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<sup>3</sup> See Francis West, *Gilbert Murray: A Life* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1984), 25-58; Duncan Wilson, *Gilbert Murray OM, 1866-1957* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 25-40.

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own, and Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1929 & 1938]).

onto its normal, progressive, course.<sup>5</sup> 'The League', Murray declared, 'is the great institution invented by modern man for preserving and improving the social order without either war or revolution'.<sup>6</sup>

Yet it would be wrong to think that Murray assumed that this progressive course was trouble-free. As might be expected from the foremost interpreter of the Greek world to his generation, Murray was alive to the tragic element of life, and it is worth dwelling on this for a few moments. The whole animal kingdom, Murray asserted, killed in order to live. Human beings lived by eating other animals or else by eating their food. Constant fighting and killing was a fundamental fact of life and no moral problem could be properly addressed without recognition of it. Life was not based on peace but 'on an unrelenting murderous struggle'.<sup>7</sup> There was, furthermore, a glamour attaching to combat and war that no pacifically minded person should ignore. War brought forth horror but also excitement. Acts of physical courage and heroism won admiration regardless of the virtue of their underlying motivation or the effects they caused. The desire to test oneself in the face of danger was a deep human instinct. Doing so for others brought adoration in life and in death immortal memory.<sup>8</sup> There was nobility in the ideal 'dulce et decorum est pro patria mori'.

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<sup>5</sup> The thrust, of course, of Carr's critique of liberalism in *Conditions of Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1942), in some ways a superior book to the more famous *Twenty Years' Crisis*.

<sup>6</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 154.

<sup>7</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Here Murray comes close to what Philip Windsor used to describe as 'transcending the contingent'. See Mats Berdal (ed.), *Studies in International Relations: Essays by Philip Windsor* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2002).

Here we see Murray setting out a position that defies the naïve utopianism with which he is often associated. 'Strife', he continues, 'in the strict sense of striving or conflict is integral to life. You cannot fully have life without it'.<sup>9</sup> If peace was taken to mean the absence of effort and striving it was not desirable to have it perpetual. 'Life without strife would be mere decay'.<sup>10</sup> Certain things were so good and valuable that fighting for them was justified, and there were some senses in which the fighting itself might be 'good'. But unlike later Realists who were to erect a pessimistic social philosophy around these and other insights into the nature human beings and their society, Murray saw them as important but not immutable facts. As ever with Murray, 'civilization' was the key. As civilization developed the law 'kill to live' was gradually replaced with the law 'co-operate to live'. Man was a gregarious animal. While it was true that he could not live without killing it was also true that he could not live without companionship and love. Here could be found the seeds of group co-operation and self-sacrifice for the good of the community. Strife and conflict remained 'a permanent necessity in life'<sup>11</sup> but as civilization advanced the quality of strife changed. Other tests of strength, courage, nerve, endurance, discipline, and honour replaced the resort to arms. Peaceful forms of striving replaced violent forms.

As to the glamour of war, with the arrival of modern, mechanised war much of this had dissipated. Fighting had lost the directness and the call to arms the simplicity of earlier eras. War was now so complicated that it could no longer without bitter irony be called 'dulce et decorum'. The moral

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<sup>9</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 24.

degradation and debasement which accompanied modern war far outweighed the traditional martial virtues of discipline, loyalty, and resilience—the development of which modern civilian life now provided ample scope. Apologists for war confused the human attributes that made it possible with its nature. War was not an element in human nature like strife, fear, or ambition. War was a form of state action. It was no more an instinct or an element of human nature than an income tax or a protective tariff. Those who sought to abolish war among civilized peoples were not so naïve as to think that human combativeness and other primitive instincts could be abolished. The point of civilization was to provide more productive and pacific outlets for them—especially important in an age when war had ceased to be a safety valve for surplus energies and passions and had become an ‘explosion wrecking the whole machine’.<sup>12</sup> The ‘fundamental condemnation of war ...is not its expense, not its waste of life, not even its dysgenic influence on the race in destroying the fit and preserving the unfit: it is that it is incompatible with civilization’.<sup>13</sup> And the building of civilization, Murray insisted, was the main task of mankind.<sup>14</sup>

Murray devotes the first chapter of *Ordeal* to spelling out these ideas, which in a sense constitute the social philosophy on which the subsequent more practical chapters are built. In these chapters Murray sets out his view of where we—meaning ‘the civilized world’ and especially ‘Anglo-Saxondom’<sup>15</sup>—are now and what must be done to create a Cosmos—a rational, ordered,

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<sup>12</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> ‘This service of civilization is our true work; the occupation that gives meaning to life’. Murray, *Ordeal*, 39.

<sup>15</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 163-7.



unity—out of the Chaos wrought by the war. The nineteenth century was a period of untrammelled scientific, technical, intellectual, moral and social progress<sup>16</sup>, but it grew too confident and forgot to criticise. In particular it forgot to criticise the principles guiding its international relations, and it failed to spot its ‘one great flaw’: the international anarchy. States remained, as they had been in Medieval times, judge and jury in the own cause. They had limited means available to them to resolve their disputes. International co-operation was sporadic and disorganised. International law was weak and undeveloped. National armament grew unchecked. There were no collective means to identify and punish the law-breaker. Diplomacy was atomistic. There was no available method for identifying the common good and little incentive to pursue it.<sup>17</sup> The wonder was not that such a system broke down but that it survived for so long (a matter, incidentally, that Murray failed to examine).

Murray’s solution contains few surprises: the League; collective security; disarmament; the development of international law; economic sanctions; pacific settlement of international disputes (conciliation, arbitration, adjudication); the extension of the mandates system; greater ‘League spirit’. A fascinating feature of the book, however, is that it anticipates many of the problems these prescriptions were soon to encounter<sup>18</sup> yet does not dwell

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<sup>16</sup> Murray’s evaluation of the nineteenth century was to say the least sanguine. See e.g. *Ordeal*, 47-8, 51-2, 137, 162, 170-2, 205-6, 220.

<sup>17</sup> Throughout these chapters Murray relies on a straightforward domestic analogy. The problems with this mode of reasoning are legion. See Hidemi Suganami, *The Domestic Analogy and World Order Proposals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). The problems with Murray’s thinking are the same as can be found in Leonard Woolf. See Peter Wilson, *The International Theory of Leonard Woolf* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 76-9.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. pp. 72-3 on the uncertainty of the distinction between justiciable and non-justiciable disputes; pp. 80-82 on the fact that ‘law is not always justice’; p. 86 on the paradox of threatening war in order to prevent war; pp. 90-1 on the difficulty of expecting states to go to war, as required by collective security, when their immediate interests are not threatened; pp. 92-4 on the ‘unequal costs’

upon them. This is partly due to Murray's faith in reason, science, and the collective wisdom of the world's great experts and 'savants' to solve any problem put before them (Murray for many years chaired the ICIC).<sup>19</sup> Any problems not yet resolved in time surely would be. But there is a deeper reason for Murray's failure to dwell and the problems he astutely identified. The 'ordeal' that concerned him was not only the ordeal he outlined in his Preface, but the ordeal of having to come to terms with the devastating blow and loss of life of the First World War—the 'loss of a generation' that Murray himself had helped to nurture (at least its elite element, which in Murray's Olympian mind effectively was this generation). For men of Murray's generation, class, and temperament, the shock of the war was so great that it was difficult for them to contemplate that the order in which they had invested so much hope was in some fundamental respects flawed. The personal shock to Murray and the anguish it caused<sup>20</sup> has been well described in various biographies.<sup>21</sup> It coloured virtually everything he wrote on the subject. In *Ordeal* one gets a vivid sense of what war now meant to the Victorian-minted liberal of the early twentieth century. War had become detestable and wicked. It made civilised life, and the qualities needed to build and sustain it—patience, reasonableness, mutual respect, fair play, public spiritedness, respect for law and personal liberty—impossible. Another war would spell the

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problem of sanctions; p. 96 on whether aggressors technically defined are always in the wrong; pp. 112-13 on the cure of enforcement being potentially worse than the disease; pp. 137-44 (and also Wilson, 'Retrieving Cosmos', 246-7) on the tendency of states to hedge their bets in treaties.

<sup>19</sup> Fulsomely expressed in *Ordeal*, ch. 6, and analysed in Peter Wilson, 'Gilbert Murray and International Relations: Hellenism, Liberalism, and International Intellectual Cooperation as a Path to Peace', *Review of International Studies* (forthcoming, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> One measure of this is that Murray kept photographs of the pupils and younger colleagues who had fallen during the war on his study mantelpiece for the rest of his life.

<sup>21</sup> See West, *Murray*, 159-60; Wilson, *Gilbert Murray OM*, 244-5; Ann Paludan, 'Remembering our Grandfather', in Stray, *Murray Reassessed*, 10.

end of the Empire and the benign leadership of Britain.<sup>22</sup> ‘We stand to gain nothing by war; we stand to lose all’.<sup>23</sup> It could also spell the end of Western liberal civilization. ‘Who in Europe does not know that one more war in the West, and the civilization of the ages will fall with as great a shock as that of Rome?’<sup>24</sup> Tellingly, the volume ends with the words: ‘only by the abolition of war can civilization be saved’.<sup>25</sup>

In this outlook on war and what it meant for Britain lies the psychological origins of appeasement. The central object of foreign policy must be ‘by active foresight to exclude the possibility of war among the great civilized Powers’.<sup>26</sup> ‘For every civilized nation henceforth the first and most vital interest is to be free from the prospect of war, but most of all for the British Empire’.<sup>27</sup> ‘Our ship has got to be saved; saved with all its faults of construction and all its injustices’.<sup>28</sup> ‘It is more important to get rid of war than rectify than to the treaties’.<sup>29</sup> ‘There is no nation more completely innocent than Great Britain of any design to plot against its enemies; there is no nation to whom continuous peace is so vital a necessity’.<sup>30</sup> While Murray opposed the actual policy of appeasement pursued by the Chamberlain government 1936-39,<sup>31</sup> these forthright words contain all its essential ingredients—Britain

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<sup>22</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 27-33, 36-7, 177-81. For an acute analysis of Murray’s attitude to empire (and that of fellow liberal and ICIC member, Sir Alfred Zimmern) see Jeannie Morefield, *Covenants without Swords: Idealist Liberalism and the Spirit of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 234.

<sup>24</sup> Stanley Baldwin, Prime Minister, quoted in Murray, *Ordeal*, 225.

<sup>25</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 236.

<sup>26</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 226.

<sup>27</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 234.

<sup>28</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 210.

<sup>29</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 115.

<sup>30</sup> Murray, *Ordeal*, 137.

<sup>31</sup> As did many liberal internationalists and League protagonists (see Lucian Ashworth, *International Relations and the Labour Party: Intellectuals and Policy Making from 1918-1945* (London, I. B.

was a satisfied Power, of all the Powers she had the most to lose, peace was her supreme interest, peace came before reform, even before justice. In *Ordeal* they are accompanied by liberal enunciation of the efficacy of non-military sanctions, and a pronounced reluctance (evident in Murray's writings until the late 1930s) to call military sanctions under the League Covenant by their real name.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps as significantly this outlook on war, which put so much emphasis on the maintenance of order, was a manifestation of a growing conservatism in Murray's broader political outlook—in 1950 he voted Conservative for the first time, and he was a confidante of the Conservative Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, during the Suez Crisis and publically supported Britain's action.<sup>33</sup> His liberalism thus became easy prey for radical critics who were able to portray it as the self-interested ideology of privileged classes and/or privileged nations, its principles and prescriptions no more than instruments for the maintenance of privileges in a world no longer hospitable to them.

Hedley Bull once wrote that books such as Murray's were not worth reading now except for the light they throw on the preoccupations and presuppositions of their age.<sup>34</sup> This view held sway for a generation. The writings of the inter-war liberals were of mere historical interest. But a number of works in the past ten years have demonstrated that there is more of value

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Tauris, 2007), ch. 4; and Martin Ceadel, 'Gilbert Murray and International Politics', in Stray, *Murray Reassessed*, 234-7), though this does not absolve them, in my view, from the charge of having earlier helped to lay its psychological foundations.

<sup>32</sup> See further Wilson, 'Retrieving Cosmos', 257; Wilson, *International Theory of Leonard Woolf*, 68-73.

<sup>33</sup> Ceadel, 'Gilbert Murray and International Politics', 237.

<sup>34</sup> Hedley Bull, 'The Theory of International Politics, 1919-1969', in B. Porter (ed.), *The Aberystwyth Papers* (London: Oxford University Press), 34.

in these works than Bull assumed—and like Carr he yielded a broad brush which tarnished many good works and ideas along with the bad. Examples include international administration of war torn and divided territories, the commissioning of international panels of experts to investigate social and technical matters of global importance, and the prosecution of individuals for war crimes by international tribunals—all of which have their roots in the inter-war period. But a deeper objection can be made. There is a conservative premise underlying Bull's claim: namely, that there are certain timeless truths about international relations that some great minds of the distant past understood and developed, but which certain well-intentioned but lesser minds of more recent times failed to recognise. It is more probably the case, however, that even the greatest thoughts from the past, whatever criteria we use to establish them, need modern interpreters. They need an agent in the present to keep them alive. But this often involves the highlighting of some features and the disregard of others, their recalibration—conscious or not—to suit the purposes of the agent, and their re- or de-contextualising to such a degree that they are stripped of much of the meaning originally imputed to them. It has been argued that Bull indulged in some of these acts in his work on the 'continued importance of Grotius'.<sup>35</sup> The point is that it is not the voyage of discovery into thought past that is important but the imaginative dialogue between thought present and past. Looked at in this way, books like *Ordeal* are important precisely because they throw great light on the preoccupations and presuppositions of their age. The theoretical enterprise, in IR as much as any field of social enquiry, is one involving observation and the

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<sup>35</sup> See Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. 34-40, 97-99.

formulation and reformulation of hypotheses in the light of experience. But conceived as a humanistic as opposed to strictly social-scientific enterprise they also involve the acquisition of self-consciousness—the self-consciousness of the theorist about the nature of his/her enterprise, including the often subtle ways that the observer is conditioned by the observed. We can identify and understand the preoccupations and presuppositions of our own age—and in the process become more subtle observers—only by revisiting and reflecting on works that reveal the preoccupations and presuppositions of past ages, especially those of such pitch and moment as the inter-war period.

Different readers will take different things from *Ordeal* and will reach different conclusions about the continued relevance of its claims. But the fact that in many important respects it transports us to a different age should not bar it from being taken seriously by contemporary IR theorists. A humanistic, and indeed properly hermeneutic, approach to social enquiry requires us to read works that do not reflect the assumptions, aspirations, and prejudices of our age precisely to heighten our consciousness of those attributes and put them into sharper focus. Such works, especially by scholars of the eminence, and erudition of Murray, help to provide us with that invaluable commodity 'perspective' and thus, as Martin Wight was fond of saying, liberate us from the *zeitgeist*.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See Hedley Bull, 'Martin Wight and the Theory of International Relations', in M. Wight, *International Relations: The Three Traditions*, eds. G. Wight and B. Porter (London: Leicester University Press, 1991), xx.