Ronald Firbank

Arthur Annesley Ronald Firbank (17 January 1886 – 21 May 1926) was an innovative British novelist. His eight short novels, partly inspired by the London aesthetes of the 1890s, especially Oscar Wilde, consist largely of dialogue, with references to religion, social-climbing, and sexuality.

BIOGRAPHY

Arthur Annesley Ronald Firbank was born in Britain on 17 January 1886, at Clarges Street in London, the son of MP Sir Thomas Firbank and Lady Firbank (nee Harriet Jane Garrett). He had an older brother, Joseph Sydney (born 1884), and a younger brother, Hubert Somerset (born 1887), and sister, Heather (born 1888).[1]

At the age of ten he went briefly to Uppingham School (September 1900 to April 1901)[2] and then on to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He converted to Catholicism in 1907. In 1909 he left Cambridge without taking a degree.

Living off his inheritance, he travelled around Spain, Italy, the Middle East, and North Africa. Openly gay[3] and chronically shy, he was an enthusiastic consumer of alcohol and cannabis. He died of lung disease in Rome, aged 40, and is buried in the Campo Verano cemetery.[4]
WORK

Firbank published his first story, "Odette d'Antrevernes", in 1905, before going up to Cambridge. He then produced a series of novels, from The Artificial Princess (written in 1915, published posthumously in 1934) and Vainglory (1915, his longest work) to Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli (1926, also posthumous).

Inclinations (1916) is set mainly in Greece, where the fifteen-year-old Mabel Collins is travelling with her chaperone, Miss O'Brookomore. Mabel elopes with an Italian conte, but the plot is of minor importance and the interest, as with all Firbank's work, lies in the dialogue. His next novel Caprice followed in 1917.

Valmouth (1919) is based on the lives of various people in a health resort on the West Coast of England; most of the inhabitants are centenarians, and some are older ("the last time I went to the play...was with Charles the Second and Louise de Querouaille, to see Betterton play Shylock"). The inconsequential plot is concerned with the attempts of two elderly ladies, Mrs Hurstpierpoint and Mrs Thoroufare, to marry off the heir to Hare-Hatch House, Captain Dick Thoroufare. Captain Thoroufare, who is engaged to a black woman, Niri-Esther, is loved frantically by Thetis Tooke, a farmer's daughter, but prefers his 'chum', Jack Whorwood, to both of them. Meanwhile Mrs Yajñavalkya, a black masseuse, manages an alliance between the centenarian Lady Parvula de Panzoust and David Tooke, Thetis's brother. A musical comedy of 1958 by Sandy Wilson gave the novel some popularity in the 1960s, and has been revised several times and recorded on CD.

This was followed by a story, "Santal" (1921), that describes an Arab boy's search for God. In his next novel, The Flower Beneath The Foot (1923), the setting is an imaginary country somewhere in the Balkans. The characters include the King and Queen, sundry high-born ladies about the Court, and the usual attendant chorus of priests and nuns.

Sorrow in Sunlight (1924), renamed Prancing Nigger at the suggestion of the American publisher but first published in Britain under the author's original title, was especially successful in America. It is set in a Caribbean republic (compounded of Cuba and Haiti). A socially ambitious black family move from their rural home to the capital, and the story is concerned with their attempts, which prove mainly abortive, to 'get into society'.

Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli (1926) begins with the Cardinal christening a dog in his cathedral ("And thus being cleansed and purified, I do call thee "Crack"!") and ends with His Eminence dying of a heart attack while chasing, naked, a choirboy around the aisles.[5]

Firbank's play The Princess Zoubaroff (1920) has been compared to William Congreve, but is rarely produced. Dame Edith Evans, perhaps the greatest British actress of her time, played the title part in a radio production in 1964. The dialogue is highly characteristic: for example, Princess Zoubaroff says: "I am always disappointed with mountains. There are no mountains in the world as high as I would wish... They irritate me invariably. I should like to shake Switzerland."

Firbank's Complete Short Stories were published in a single volume in 1990 edited by Steven Moore, and his Complete Plays in 1991 in a volume containing The Princess Zoubaroff, "The Mauve Tower" and "A Disciple from the Country".

Ronald Firbank left among his manuscripts the first few characteristic chapters of a novel set in New York, The New Rythum (sic), published in 1962 after a sale of many of his manuscripts and letters.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

His novels have been championed by many English novelists including E. M. Forster, Evelyn Waugh, Alan Hollinghurst and Simon Raven. The poet W. H. Auden praised him highly in a radio broadcast on the BBC Third Programme in June 1961 (the text of the broadcast was published in The Listener of 8 June 1961). Susan Sontag named his novels as part of "the canon of camp"[6] in her 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp'".[7]

In her 1973 critical biography, Prancing Novelist, Brigid Brophy examines Firbank's cult of Oscar Wilde.


In Alan Hollinghurst's novel The Swimming Pool Library Firbank's work and life are central themes.

FIRBANK’S PUBLISHED WORKS

EARLY PUBLICATIONS

'An Early Flemish Painter', in The Academy; 73 (28 September 1903), p. 948 (about Jan Gossaert).


"Harmonie ... (trad. de l'anglais par l'auteur)", in Les Essais. Revue Mensuelle; II (February 1905), pp. 305–06.

"Souvenir d'automne. A Poem In Prose". Supplement to The King and His Navy and Army; 21 (2 December 1905).

Odette d'Antrevernes And A Study in Temperament (stories, 1905).

Odette d'Antrevernes (1905) [separate large-paper edition].


"A Study In Opa", in Granta; 21 (2 November 1907).

MAJOR WORKS

Vainglory ... With a Frontispiece by Felicien Rops (novel, 1915)

Inclinations ... With two Drawings by Albert Rutherston (Rothenstein) (novel, 1916)
POSTHUMOUS PUBLICATIONS

The Artifical Princess ... With an Introduction by Sir Coleridge Kennard (novel, 1934) [written c. 1915].
"Lady Appledore's Mesalliance", in Cornhill Magazine; 172 (story, summer 1962), pp. 399–425 [written c. 1908].
The New Rythm And Other Pieces (novel fragment, 1962) [incl. extracts from The Mauve Tower (play written c. 1904), A Disciple From The Country (play), "The Widow's Love" and "A Tragedy in Green"].
The Wind & The Roses ... Introduction by Miriam J. Benkovicz, privately printed (poem, 1966)
Ronald Firbank Far Away ... Note by Miriam J. Benkovicz (1966) [written 1904].
Ronald Firbank - When Widows Love & A Tragedy in Green ... Introduced by Edward Martin Potoker (1980).

NOTES

FURTHER READING


EXTERNAL LINKS

Works by or about Ronald Firbank at Internet Archive
Works by Ronald Firbank, at Unz.org
Ronald Firbank at Find a Grave
Sorrow in Sunlight
Ronald Firbank: An Inventory of His Collection at the Harry Ransom Center

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British novelist Ronald Firbank was born in London, the son of society lady Harriet Jane Garrett and MP Sir Thomas Firbank. He went to Uppingham School, and then on to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He converted to Catholicism in 1907. In 1909 he left Cambridge, without completing a degree. Living off his inheritance he travelled around Spain, Italy, the Middle East, and North Africa. Ronald Firbank died of lung disease while in Rome. Combine Editions. Ronald Firbank's books. Ronald Firbank Average rating: 3.48.

Arthur Annesley Ronald Firbank (17 January 1886 – 21 May 1926) was an innovative English novelist. His eight short novels, partly inspired by the London aesthetes of the 1890s, especially Oscar Wilde, consist largely of dialogue, with references to religion, social-climbing, and sexuality. Arthur Annesley Ronald Firbank was born on 17 January 1886, in Clarges Street, Westminster, the son of a Member of Parliament, Sir Thomas Firbank, and Lady Firbank, nee Harriette Jane Garrett. He had an older brother Ronald Firbank was born in London, the son of society lady Harriet Jane Garrett and MP Sir Thomas Firbank. He went to Uppingham School, and then on to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He converted to Catholicism in 1907. Alan Hollinghurst, 'The shy, steely Ronald Firbank', edited version of the third of the 2006 Lord Northcliffe Lectures given at University College, London, October 2006, in Times Literary Supplement, November. Mervyn Horder (ed.), Ronald Firbank: memoirs and critiques', London, Duckworth, 1977.