

Her Privates We

FREDERIC MANNING

with an Introduction by William Boyd

*On fortune's cap we are not the very button. . . .
Then you live about her waist, or in the middle
of her favours? . . . 'Faith, her privates we.*

SHAKESPEARE



A complete catalogue record for this book can be obtained from the
British Library on request

The right of Frederic Manning to be identified as the author of this
work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act 1988

Introduction copyright © 1999 William Boyd

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without
the prior permission of the publisher.

First published in a limited edition in 1929 as
The Middle Parts of Fortune

Published in an expurgated version in 1930 as *Her Privates We*

First published in this edition in 2013 by Serpent's Tail
First published in this unexpurgated version in 1999 by Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street
London EC1R 0JH
www.serpentstail.com

ISBN 978 1 84668 787 7
eISBN 978 1 84765 764 0

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Author's Prefatory Note

While the following pages are a record of experience on the Somme and Ancre fronts, with an interval behind the lines, during the latter half of the year 1916; and the events described in it actually happened; the characters are fictitious. It is true that in recording the conversations of the men I seemed at times to hear the voices of ghosts. Their judgments were necessarily partial and prejudiced; but prejudices and partialities provide most of the driving power of life. It is better to allow them to cancel each other, than attempt to strike an average between them. Averages are too colourless, indeed too abstract in every way, to represent concrete experience. I have drawn no portraits; and my concern has been mainly with the anonymous ranks, whose opinion, often mere surmise and ill-informed, but real and true for them, I have tried to represent faithfully.

War is waged by men; not by beasts, or by gods. It is a peculiarly human activity. To call it a crime against mankind is to miss at least half its significance; it is also the punishment of a crime. That raises a moral question, the kind of problem with which the present age is disinclined to deal. Perhaps some future attempt to provide a solution for it may prove to be even more astonishing than the last.

[1929]

Introduction by William Boyd

Two brief quotations will serve as the best introduction to this unique and extraordinary novel, the finest novel, in my opinion, to have come out of the First World War. The scene takes place in the reserve lines in the Somme valley in northern France during the late summer of 1916. A corporal is dressing-down the men in his section.

‘“You shut your blasted mouth, see!” said the exasperated Corporal Hamley, stooping as he entered the tent, the lift of his head, with chin thrust forward as he stooped, giving him a more desperately aggressive appearance. “An’ you let me ’ear you talkin’ on parade again with an officer present and you’ll be on the bloody mat quick. See? You miserable begger, you! A bloody cow like you’s sufficient to demoralize a whole muckin’ Army Corps. Got it? Get those buzzers out, and do some bloody work for a change.”’

Nothing too unusual here: standard NCO aggression, an attempt to render the colloquial nature of the speech by dropping the odd consonant, perhaps a hint of a more refined sensibility present in the way Corporal Hamley’s entry into the tent is so precisely described. But now here is the same passage as it was originally written and as it was originally meant to be read.

‘“You shut your blasted mouth, see!” said the exasperated Corporal Hamley, stooping as he entered the tent, the lift of his head, with chin thrust forward as he stooped, giving him a more desperately aggressive appearance, “An’ you let me ’ear you talkin’ on parade again with an officer present and you’ll be on the bloody mat, quick. See? You miserable bugger you! A bloody cunt like you’s sufficient to demoralise a whole

fuckin' Army Corps. Got it? Get those buzzers out, and do some bloody work, for a change."'

It is remarkable the change wrought by the good old Anglo-Saxon demotic of 'bugger', 'cunt' and 'fuckin''. What was familiar, stereotypical, almost parodic, becomes suddenly real – the whole situation charged and violent. And in its wider context – the First World War – a whole new resonance emerges. Those monochrome images we know so well – Tommies puffing on their fags, troops marching through French villages, the lunar landscape of no man's land – suddenly have a different import. Suddenly, a veil is stripped away. These are real men, real soldiers – and all soldiers swear, vilely, constantly. This is a world where corporals call their men 'cunts'.

Her Privates *We* was not the title chosen for the first, unexpurgated edition of this novel, which was privately printed and issued in an impression of some 600 copies, and is what you will read here. Frederic Manning called this version of his book *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, changing the title for the later, bowdlerised, public version. And, even though we have had the uncensored novel for some three decades now, the book's fame and reputation have always been associated with the second title. Both titles, in fact, come from *Hamlet* (Act II, scene 2) when Hamlet indulges in a bit of saucy badinage with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When Hamlet asks how the 'good lads' are Guildenstern replies: 'Happy in that we are not overhappy / On Fortune's cap we are not the very button.'

HAMLET: Nor the soles of her shoe?

ROSENCRANTZ: Neither, my lord.

HAMLET: Then you live about her waist, or in the middle of her favour.

GUILDENSTERN: Faith, her privates we.

HAMLET: In the secret parts of Fortune? O, most true, she is a strumpet. What's the news?

I take the allusion in several ways. First, I think Manning acknowledges that the very coarseness of the book is its

strongest and most shocking asset. Especially in 1930, when it was published, even the cleaned-up version would have seemed relentlessly profane. Secondly, it draws attention to the role of luck and blind chance in men's lives, particularly in a war. Fortune, as Evelyn Waugh once memorably said, is the most capricious of deities. And third, it advertises the book's intellectual seriousness. For although this is a novel about private soldiers, those at the bottom end of the army's food chain, the authorial brain informing it is rigorously intelligent and clear-eyed. And, as if to ram that point home, every chapter has a Shakespearean epigraph.

Even when the book was first published, credited pseudonymously to one 'Private 19022', it would be apparent to any reader that the central character, Bourne, is different from the ordinary soldiers around him. The tone of voice, the intellectual nature of the book's reflection and analysis, the sardonic sensibility, all spoke of a different category of author than a mere private soldier. And when the identity of the author was eventually revealed there was even more of a surprise – but more of that later.

Her Privates We has little to do with actual combat – most of its action takes place behind the lines, in reserve or in billets as the battalion trains, does fatigues and waits for its turn in the front-line trenches. Bourne is a thoughtful and ruminative man, taciturn, an almost lugubrious presence – an older man, too, educated, but with no desire to exploit the privileges that this education, and what was then called 'breeding', would have provided for him in the army. He is friendly with the NCOs – happy to go drinking with the sergeants, and, because he can speak French, is used by the men as an interpreter and provider of services, with the local population.

Here again, despite the classically turned prose of the novel, its modernity emerges. While they wait to go into battle, the men's interests are focused on food, drink, sex and idleness – probably in that order. Bourne observes all this and bears calm and cool witness. The men tolerate rather than respect their officers, they show no military zeal or patriotic fervour, they have no faith in their leaders and

no real interest in the war: ‘. . . they were now mere derelicts in a wrecked and dilapidated world, with sore and angry nerves sharpening their tempers, or shutting them up in a morose or sullen humour from which it was difficult to move them.’ Time and again Bourne’s observations undermine the stereotype of the First World War and in so doing paint a picture of men at war that is – after decades of mythmaking and romance – both bitterly fresh and timeless.

When *Her Privates We* was published in 1930 it became an almost immediate success, some 15,000 copies selling in the first three months as newspaper columnists vied with each other trying to guess the identity of ‘Private 19022’. Manning’s cover was blown relatively quickly. One of the first to guess the true identity of the author was T. E. Lawrence who claimed that within six weeks of the book’s publication he had read it three times.

Lawrence recognised Manning as the author because he was a great admirer of Manning’s book *Scenes and Portraits* (published in 1909). When Manning’s identity was revealed to the world at large it came as something of a shock. Frederic Manning was a minor figure in Edwardian literary circles, a Greek scholar, a poet, a belle-lettrist, friend of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot – he seemed a million miles away from the foulmouthed soldiers in his novel, scrounging for booze and bitching about the war.

Manning was in fact an Australian, born in 1882 to a prosperous family in Sydney. His father was mayor of Sydney, later knighted, and his brother became Attorney General. Manning, a neurasthenic young man of perpetually failing health, came to England in 1903, determined to make a career in literature. And his efforts followed the predictable path of those blessed with a modest talent, a private income and low ambition: reviews and poems printed in periodicals, a turgid epic poem called *The Vigil of Brunhilde*, and then finally the critical success of *Scenes and Portraits*, a series of imaginative dialogues between historical figures which displays a refined and ironic intellectual preciosity but which now reads as hopelessly

dated. However, in 1909, the *reclame* of the book finally permitted Manning full access into Edwardian literary circles and it was at this time that he and Ezra Pound became friends.

What little information there is on the early life of Frederic Manning makes it hard to believe that one day he would write *Her Privates We*. Before the war Manning published regular reviews for the *Spectator* and other periodicals, and the occasional poem appeared in little magazines. He lived in a vicarage in the countryside and, when he could afford it, travelled in Europe. Nothing about his life distinguishes him from many other somewhat effete and vaguely talented *litterateurs* that then abounded. There seems also to have been no grand romantic passion in his life – with either sex – and even his friendships, with the painter William Rothenstein, with Pound, appear oddly formal and distanced.

When war broke out in 1914 Manning did not volunteer immediately because he thought he would fail the army medical. He continued to scratch a living from his pen but eventually in October 1915 he enlisted in the Shropshire Light Infantry and reported for training at Pembroke Dock in South Wales.

Manning was now ‘Private 19022’. Quite why he had not attempted to apply for a commission is not clear – it is possible he had, but had been rejected (I am indebted for much of this information to Jonathan Marwil’s *Frederic Manning: An Unfinished Life*). However, after some weeks of basic training he was selected and sent to Oxford to train as an Officer Cadet. Manning’s role as a tyro officer did not last long – he was returned to his unit in June 1916 for drunkenness.

So Manning went to France in August 1916 as a private, an elderly private too, at the age of thirty-four – there were boys of sixteen at the battle of the Somme. He was joining the secondary stages of the Somme battle that had begun with the catastrophic slaughter of 60,000 killed and wounded on the first day – July 1st – and that would fizzle out in the freezing mud and snow as winter closed in at the year’s end. In August the Shropshires soon saw heavy

fighting around Guillemot, in the southern section of the Somme battle front, and later, towards the end of the year, on the Ancre front at Serre. Manning's war as a private soldier lasted just over four months. He returned to London at Christmas 1916, again to attempt officer training.

Those four months on the Somme front provide the background for *Her Privates We*. Bourne's war, in the novel, is very close to Manning's both geographically and in terms of the experience undergone. Just as Bourne was transferred to signals, and thus to comparative safety, so too was Manning. And just as Bourne was constantly urged to apply for a commission, so too, one must suppose, was Manning. In any event, when complied with, the new experience was not a happy one. Manning duly became a lieutenant in the Royal Irish Regiment but his drinking problems became more serious (in the novel, Bourne is an intermittent but redoubtably heavy drinker). In August 1917, in Dublin, Manning was summoned before a court martial and severely reprimanded. In October 1917 he was in hospital, suffering from delirium tremens. Shortly after, he offered to resign his commission and was accepted. But Manning carried on drinking and was described by his battalion medical officer after one binge as being in 'a stupor, quite unfit for any duty, evidently the result of a drinking bout'. Manning's own account was blunt and factual: 'For some time . . . I had been suffering from continual insomnia and nervous exhaustion. I was in an extremely weak condition of health generally, and in those circumstances had recourse to stimulants.' Manning's self-diagnosis is more easy to understand in this, the day and age of post-traumatic stress disorder, but in 1918 he met with little sympathy: his military career was over.

After the war Manning took up his old life as a jobbing man-of-letters again – literary journalism and hack work in the shape of a biography of a famous naval architect. He moved in the same obscure literary and intellectual circles as before, returning to Australia in 1925 for a visit. But there is a sense of the decade of the 1920s being one long slow slide of apathy and disillusion. He published a small book on Epicurus and wrote reviews for T. S. Eliot at

the *Criterion*. Manning, a lifelong chain smoker, was still drinking heavily and, inevitably, health problems returned. He had thirteen teeth extracted. Photographs at the time show a gaunt, seamed face, prematurely aged. It was only when the publisher Peter Davies urged him to write his war memoirs that some form of energy returned and *Her Privates We* was composed in a few galvanised weeks. Manning had never written so easily, before or since.

But the success and fame of the novel, as well as temporary prosperity, brought little contentment. Manning's health was failing and it seems he was by now suffering from emphysema. He travelled to Australia again in 1932 and passed sixteen isolated months there. Manning returned to England but spent most of his time in and out of rest homes and hospitals. He now needed oxygen to help him breathe. Any cold or attack of flu brought with it deadly risks. Early in 1935 Manning contracted pneumonia which, coupled with his chronic emphysema, proved swiftly fatal: he died on the 22nd February. He was fifty-two years old.

At the centre of Frederick Manning's short and disappointed life stands the monument of *Her Privates We*. It was a book that Ernest Hemingway read each year, 'to remember how things really were so that I will never lie to myself nor to anyone else about them'. Hemingway has got to the heart of the book's dogged and lasting appeal. There are many superb memoirs and testimonials about the First World War that have stood the test of time and become classics. Owen, Sassoon, Blunden and Graves are permanent members of the poetry canon. It is perhaps somewhat strange that apart from *Her Privates We*, there are no English novels that came out of the Great War with a similar status. Yet it is precisely because *Her Privates We* is a novel that its reputation and its import are so remarkable and so affecting. Fiction adds a different dimension that the purely documentary and historical cannot aspire to. As Hemingway said on another occasion: 'I make the truth as I invent it truer than it would be.' This is what the novel does and this explains the enduring power behind