

Thoughts on *The Good Soldier* by Ford Madox Ford

Most devotees of Ford Madox Ford's finest achievement, *The Good Soldier*, will agree that the search for autobiographical clues is ultimately a fairly redundant exercise when one compares the satisfactions to be had from allowing the text to speak for itself. As the late Roger Poole noted in his celebrated essay of 1990 (*The Real Plot Line of The Good Soldier*, *Textual Practice*, Volume 4 Number 3), the "deconstructive disbelief in a locus of originating intention is more 'essentialist' than any form of questioning of it."

However, as part of the process of taking authority away from the author and allowing primacy to the text, the trail of clues and red herrings – a trail of such complexity that it has perhaps never been bettered in English fiction – inevitably leads us to speculations which return us to the more prosaic grounds of autobiography.

I would like to offer a few thoughts in that vein on the subject of convents in the novel.

What do we read? Firstly, the doomed Maisie Maiden writes to Leonora in her valedictory letter: "You should not have done it, and we out of the same convent..." Secondly, we know that Leonora attended a convent in England up until she returned home to Ireland aged 18. Thirdly, we know that Nancy attended a convent in England from the age of 13 to 18.

What of it? Well, for a start, of all the many quite extraordinary (many have said unlikely) plot components of the novel, the fact that Leonora and her husband should decamp to India for a few years to allow her to restore the family's damaged finances, and while they are there Edward should take a sentimental fancy to the wife of a brother officer who just so happened to attend the same convent school as his wife...And then, of course, the poor woman must die.

Let's move on. The text very much encourages us to believe that Nancy attended the same English convent as Leonora, without being absolutely explicit on the matter. The biggest clue is when Dowell as narrator says of Leonora's youth: "She had been one of seven daughters in a bare, untidy Irish manor house to which she had returned from the convent I have so often spoken about." Up until this point in the text, the only convent that Dowell has "spoken so much about" is Nancy's.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion, therefore, that the text is encouraging us to believe that all three women attended the same convent. This, in any other novel, might be construed as being unlikely; in *The Good Soldier*, it should set us on our toes and encourage us to be extra vigilant.

Dowell, in his sentimental conversation with Nancy in Nauheim, reports that the girl provides us with some clear identification. Firstly, she says "our school played Roehampton at Hockey." In 1904, a convent school hockey team would not have travelled far for a competitive game, which must place the school within a reasonable distance of Roehampton.

A page or so later, Dowell indulges in one of his nod-and-a-wink giveaways: "Just for the information I asked her why she always confessed, and she answered *in these exact words*:

‘Oh, well, the girls of the Holy Child have always been noted for their truthfulness.’” [my italics] Why does Dowell make such a point of signposting this information?

Back to autobiography. We know that Ford’s two daughters were educated for a time at a convent on the south coast: the Convent of the Holy Child, St Leonards. Max Saunders, in Volume One of *A Dual Life*, reports that Ford visited his daughters there in 1910.

The Society of the Holy Child Jesus was founded in England in 1846 by Cornelia Connelly. Cornelia, née Peacock (1809-1879) was the daughter of a Presbyterian Philadelphian (ring any bells?) named Ralph William Peacock. In 1831 she married the Reverend Pierce Connolly, an Episcopalian Protestant who quixotically decided, quite soon after their marriage, that he would convert to Catholicism. This both he and Cornelia did in 1835, confirming their new allegiance by relocating to Rome.

However, the Connelly’s faced the problem of celibacy: they already had two children which would make Pierce’s chances of enrolling as a Catholic priest pretty slim. So they moved back to America where Pierce got a job teaching English at a Jesuit college and Cornelia taught music. At this point, their lives became yet more complicated (in a positively Ford-like way). Firstly, their fourth child Mary died aged six months after being pushed into a vat of boiling sugar by the family’s Newfoundland dog, a development probably beyond even Ford’s imagination.

Then Pierce decided that his vocation lay as a Catholic priest and the only way for him to pursue this was to renounce his marriage and family and assume the life of a celibate. Back they went to Rome, where the helpful Pope Gregory, after gaining Cornelia’s approval, formally annulled the marriage, thus freeing Pierce to pursue his ordination which then led him to England and a job as Chaplain to Lord Shrewsbury. Cornelia, now herself avowedly celibate and formally separated from her husband, followed in his footsteps with the children and set up her own household in Derby.

Here, Cornelia set up the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, a Jesuit-informed convent for young girls. Pierce, meanwhile, became so infuriated by Cornelia’s independence that he kidnapped his children from her and took them to Rome with him to try and persuade the Pope to put *him* in charge of the Society. Cornelia moved her convent from Rugby to St Leonard’s and was then obliged to defend a notorious legal case, “Connelly vs Connelly”, initiated by Pierce in an attempt to bring Cornelia to heel and return her to her previous conjugal status.

The case became famous in England. Cornelia ultimately won a Pyrrhic victory after the intervention of the Privy Council but still lost guardianship of her children whom the increasingly demented Pierce trailed after him from Rome to America while he fulminated against the Catholic church in a series of ever more furious tracts.

Ford Madox Ford would have been very well aware of the Connelly vs Connelly case. The parallels with his own life must have struck him: his wife Elsie’s legal case against him to restore their conjugal status was almost a precise mirror image of Pierce’s against Cornelia.

Cornelia established one more convent in England, that of the Holy Child at Mayfield, in Sussex. It was here that she died in 1879.

Back to the text. We know that we are to understand that Leonora and Nancy and Maisie all attended the same convent, a convent which came under the Order of the Society of the Holy Child and which was geographically close enough to play hockey against a Roehampton School. It is possible therefore, either that the convent lurking within Ford's creative subconscious was the Mayfield convent (a distance of 50 miles from Roehampton); or that he elided his knowledge of the Holy Child Order (both from his own daughters' education and from his awareness of the Connelly vs Connelly case) with another Roehampton convent, that of the Society of the Sacred Heart. I suspect that latter is more likely and that the convent which still stands in Roehampton is in effect the subconscious model for the convent in the novel.

But more importantly, what of the significance of this tangled web for our own appreciation of the text? Firstly, I would suggest that the apparently unlikely statement that Maisie attended the same convent as Leonora is in fact a signifier: it encourages us to associate Leonora and Nancy with the same convent, even though our narrator very deliberately refuses specifically to do so. And why, therefore, would our narrator wish to encourage us in that speculation? Could it be because he wants us to identify a reason why Nancy attended the same convent as Leonora? Did she in fact attend it because her true mother – Leonora – insisted upon it and placed her there in order that she could watch over the spiritual development of her own child?

Let us allow the text to wash over that speculation and return us to the endless sea of possibilities which the novel, to this day, represents. One thing is for sure: when Ford wrote *The Good Soldier* he quite literally threw everything of himself into it to create his masterpiece.