

2010-01-01

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By Michael Foley

When the County Limerick born journalist, James David Bouchier (1850-1920) died in Sofia Bulgaria in 1920 one leading newspaper declared on its front page: 'Our Bouchier is dead'. When news of his death became widely known in Sofia a crowd gathered outside the Grand Hotel Bulgarie, where his two rooms had been the nearest thing to permanent home for the previous 30 years. It was an indication of his standing in his adopted country that his funeral service took place at the Alexander Nevski Memorial Church, a stunning monument of neo-Byzantine architecture that commemorates the Russian soldiers who died in the fight for Bulgarian freedom in 1877. According to the British Ambassador, Sir Arthur Peel, he lay in state and the King laid a wreath. Sir Arthur reported that the funeral service was carried out according to the Orthodox rite. The Ambassador also reported to the Foreign Office in London that the crowds who attended were so great that many people, including other Ambassadors, were unable to gain entry¹. Crowds lined the route through the city, as the cortege made its way Rila Monastery high in the Rhodope Mountains

King Boris personally granted Bouchier's wish to be buried at Rila monastery. Rila is a mysterious place, situated in a mountain valley, surrounded by forests and high peaks that remain snow covered for much of the year. The monastery is one of the most beautiful in Bulgaria, a country famous for its remote monasteries. It is also the centre of Bulgarian Orthodox spirituality. Bouchier is buried just outside the monastery walls. His grave is a simple granite slab, enclosed by a low metal rail, in a forest clearing. From the grave, the cupola of the monastery church can be seen. Today it is hard to find but, when he was buried, contemporary photographs show the clearing was much greater, and it would have been clearly visible from the road leading to the monastery gate. The grave simply states his name and dates, but an explanatory plaque states that he was a British journalist, despite being born and raised in Bruff, Baggotstown, Co Limerick.

One of Sofia's major roads is named Bouchier Boulevard while, at what was the Grand Hotel Bulgarie, is a plaque describing The Times correspondent as a 'sincere friend of the Bulgarian nation and a champion of the Bulgarian national cause.' Once a brand of cigarettes was named in his honour, and a set of commemorative stamps issued with his image, including one featuring Bouchier wearing the Bulgarian peasant dress he liked to wear. Bouchier's fame in Bulgaria is in marked contrast to his position in his home country, where he is little known.

Since 1888, Bouchier covered events in Bulgaria and the Balkans for the London Times. He was, however, much more than a reporter. He was, both publicly and privately, a defender of Bulgarian interests, who pleaded internationally its cause, and insisted that Bulgaria and the Balkans had significance outside those deemed important by the great powers. Bouchier reported and wrote about the Balkans for 30 years and identified with the Bulgarian people and their national interests to an amazing degree. But while he could argue for what he perceived as the rights of the Bulgarian people, he also maintained it was possible to be an impartial journalist while recognizing the rightness of

¹ Public Records Office London, FO 371 5806

a cause. Eighty years later, journalists covering wars in the Balkans would continue to struggle with the same moral issues.

Bourchier was one of many Irishmen who found their niche as reporters, working in London, or covering events abroad for the British press. A few of these are inscribed on a monument in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral commemorating journalists who covered military campaigns in the Sudan, and other areas. The Irish names include Edmond O'Donovan of the Daily News, who had worked for the Freeman's Journal, and Frank Power of The Irish Times.

Also listed on the monument in St Paul's is Sir William Howard Russell, of The Times, 'the first and greatest war correspondent'. Russell, who was from Tallaght, Co Dublin, covered the Crimea war, with some controversy, for the London Times and like Bourchier was a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin and a member of the Anglo Irish class.

Bourchier was born in 1850 into a family that could trace its roots back to the Anglo Normans, the Anglo Irish and, through his mother's family, to the Huguenots. After his father's death, his mother moved back to her family home at Castlecomer, Co Kilkenny, a place Bourchier also viewed as home, right to the end of his life.

Bourchier was educated at Portora Royal, Enniskillen, at Trinity College, Dublin and Cambridge University. He was a classical scholar and a musician. He intended being called to the Bar, but his increasing deafness, due to childhood measles, on the one hand, and lack of money, on the other, thwarted that ambition. Instead, he became a teacher at the English public school, Eton, where he was, by all accounts, unhappy. According to his biographer, Lady Grogan, he 'was unconventional and felt himself fettered and trammelled by the conventions of Eton; he made some lasting friends amongst the boys, but as a whole the *genus* boy did not appeal to him'². Perhaps because he was also reputed to be undisciplined and unpunctual, Nevertheless, he remained 10-years at Eton, despite his increasing deafness. He took little part in school life, but did write for a number of magazines and periodicals, including one piece on evictions in Ireland. After he left to take up journalism in the Balkans he was granted a small pension for three years.³

According to a 1996 reassessment of Bourchier in his old newspaper, The Times, written to commemorate the restoration of his grave at Rila:

He was a private man, nervous, haunted by growing deafness, probably homosexual, but he became a close confidant of kings and ambassadors in their labyrinthine intrigues.⁴

² Grogan, Lady, *The Life of JD Bourchier*, London, Hurst & Blackett, 1932, p 7

³ *Ibid*

⁴ *The Times*, January 22, 1996

Journalism offered an alternative that Bouchier was aware of from the time he started teaching. He wrote for periodicals and magazines and there was little doubt that he viewed writing for reviews as building up an alternative to life at Eton. Lady Grogan says he wrote occasional articles for the press. 'Some of his earliest described scenes of evictions in Ireland and drew the notice of The Times, though they were not written for that paper but published by the Globe; and these, I believe were largely responsible, together with his linguistic ability for the offer on the part of the Times of foreign correspondent in the Near East.⁵

In 1888, aged 38-years, while on his way to the Adriatic coast, as recommended by his doctor, he had dinner with the British Ambassador in Vienna. There he met the Times Austrian correspondent, an old Etonian named Brinsley Richards. They discussed his journalistic ambitions but Bouchier had few illusions about his own talents as he had no experience writing about politics or foreign affairs. Several weeks later, he received a telegram from the same correspondent, asking if he was free to cover a peasant uprising in Rumania, and then go Bulgaria, still in a state of turmoil, following a war, a coup by military officers, and the forced abdication of prince Alexander. The Bulgarians subsequently found a new prince, Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg.

Bouchier travelled to Romania where, with journalistic luck, the uprising had exacerbated. He sent a few dispatches, and then went on to Bulgaria to cover Ferdinand's first tour of his new territory. He never returned to teaching. During his first three years in the Balkans, he was freelance, offering pieces to the Times and to other reviews and journals. He wrote a long series on Bulgaria for the Fortnightly Review, which shows that it was the scenery that first attracted him, but it was not long before he became an expert on the politics of the region.

He travelled all over the Balkan Peninsula, making his first contacts with the insurgents seeking the independence of Crete, a cause he would also champion. He visited monasteries, and the remoter parts of Bulgaria, often living with peasants, eating their food and living in their homes, giving him a unique insight into the people and the place. He also learnt Bulgarian and Greek and had a passing knowledge of other languages of the area. He was gregarious and, despite his deafness, made friends and contacts easily.

Bouchier covered four wars and many insurrections in Crete, Bulgaria, Greece, Albania, Romania, and Macedonia. Four kings he knew had to abdicate, and of the rulers and statesmen who were often his sources of information, eighteen met violent deaths. He also wrote with great authority on the archaeology of Greece and the classical world, and is credited with popularising interest in ancient Greece through his articles in the Times. He also covered the first modern Olympic games.

In Bulgaria, during the 1870s, a nationalist movement grew in opposition to the Ottoman Empire. In April 1876, an armed uprising in several Bulgarian regions took place, which was suppressed by the Ottoman forces with such ferocity, wiping out entire villages, that

⁵ Grogan, p 7

European opinion swung entirely behind the Bulgarians. Support for Bulgarian independence thus became a fashionable cause. Gladstone's defence of the Bulgarians is still commemorated in Sofia, where he too has a street named after him. Following the uprising, the great powers tried to gain independence for Bulgaria through negotiations with the Ottoman Empire, but the Turks dismissed them. Finally, when all diplomatic efforts failed, Russia declared war on Turkey.

The outcome of the Russo Turkish war was the Treaty of San Stefano. The treaty, signed in March 1878, established Bulgaria as a huge state, that took in some of the Aegean coast, Thrace and, most importantly, much of present day Macedonia. According to the historian, R J. Crampton, it was 'in territorial terms ... as much as any Bulgarian nationalist could have hoped for or even dreamed of.'⁶

It was, however, too much for Britain and Austro Hungary which feared Bulgaria would become a major factor in Russian influence in the Balkans; it was Russian action, after all, which led to Bulgarian independence. London and Vienna both insisted San Stefano be ripped up, and a new treaty, the Treaty of Berlin, was signed in July of the same year. This time, Bulgaria lost all it had gained and ended up 37 per cent the size it had been under San Stefano. It lost its gains in Macedonia, which had included the cities of Ohrid and Skopje, the present day capital, which was returned to Ottoman rule. The new, reduced Bulgaria would remain a vassal state of the Ottoman sultan (as in the San Stefano treaty) with a Christian prince, elected by the Bulgarians. Again, according to Crampton: 'The new Bulgarian state was to enter into life with a ready made programme for territorial expansion and a burning sense of injustice meted out to it by the great powers.'⁷ That was the state of play when Bouchier arrived in 1888, and would remain the main influence on Bulgarian politics up to the Second World War and beyond.

This was the context in which Bouchier began working as a journalist. Bulgaria and the Balkans were seen as pivotal to the stability of Europe and relations between the powers. It was this that made Bouchier so influential, in a way a foreign correspondent can never be today. According to Irish Parliamentary Party MP and journalist, TP O'Connor: 'He was our real Ambassador.'

He was only a newspaper correspondent, but everybody in the Near East know that he was the most potent influence there- consulted by Kings and Ministers, and able, through his remarkable pen, to influence, even control all European opinion.⁸

Politicians, diplomats and the foreign office officials in London read his reports from the Balkans at a time when Britain, then a major power, viewed events in the Balkans as significant to the future of Europe. He was in constant touch with the House of Commons' Balkan Committee, and even though reporters were not given a by-line, the longer pieces for the likes of the Fortnightly Review ensured that he was a well-known

⁶ Crampton, p85

⁷ Crampton p85

⁸ TP O'Connor, *Sunday Times*, January 9th, 1921

expert on Balkan affairs. He also wrote the sections on Greece, Romania and Bulgaria for various editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. His position on The Times was not made permanent until January 1892, when he received a letter from the newspaper's manager, Mr Moberly Bell informing him that owing to other changes among Times correspondents, "you will accordingly be fully recognised as our correspondent there (Sofia)."⁹

Bourchier was regularly accused of bias towards Bulgaria, especially by Greece over this support for the Bulgarian wish to integrate Macedonia. But it was the Bulgarian government that accused him of false reporting, following the assassination of the former prime minister, Stefan Stambolov. Bourchier had been a good friend, despite what he described in the Times as 'his decidedly Orientalist methods of government'. Bourchier wrote in the Times: 'A heavy responsibility rests with those who refused Stambolov permission to leave the country, and whom, detaining him here like a prisoner, neglected the measures necessary to ensure his safety.'¹⁰

Outcry followed what was seen as an accusation against the government. Prince Ferdinand protested to the Times, eliciting a letter to Bourchier from the director of that newspaper's foreign department, Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace:

One thing, however, you ought to bear in mind: if you do your duty you will not satisfy the Palace. Already I have received complaints about your telegrams, and I have replied that I have full confidence in your judgment and impartiality. To this I have added that I do not believe any man with the independence of judgment requisite in a Times correspondent can possibly satisfy the authorities.¹¹

In the best journalistic tradition, Sir Donald followed this message with another saying:

As the spirit of political assassination seems to be abroad in Bulgaria it might be as well if you sent us a biography of Prince Ferdinand. I sincerely trust that it may lie in our pigeonhole for many years, but it is well to be prepared for all emergencies'¹²

Bourchier had to leave Bulgaria because of his reporting of atrocities against Pomaks, Bulgarians who had converted to Islam, who were attacked in retaliation whenever Macedonians suffered at the hands of Turkey. He was ordered by the Times to go into a dangerous mountainous region to find eyewitnesses to corroborate his reports. It took twelve weeks hard investigation, interviewing frightened Muslim, but, in the end, he proved that there had been terrible atrocities against Muslims.

However much he was able to show, to the satisfaction of the Times, at any rate, that he was impartial, he was still able to identify with the aspirations of both the people of Crete

⁹ Grogan, Lady. *The Life of JD ?Bourchier*, London, Hurst & Blackett, 1932 p 20

¹⁰ The Times, July 16, 1895

¹¹ Quoted in Grogan, p 46

¹² *Ibid*

and the Bulgarians, to the extent that he was able to advise governments and senior officials and, even at the time of the formation of the Balkan league, prior to the first Balkan war, act as a secret mediator between governments.

When his differences with the Bulgarian authorities dissipated, he moved back to the two hotel rooms he occupied in Sofia, opposite the Royal Palace. He was often seen galloping on his horse, with his Bulgarian servant, Ivan Gruev through the city. He was also frequently at the royal palace and the King (Ferdinand had declared full independence in 1908 and was now King) could be heard by passers-by over the palace wall briefing Bouchier by bellowing into his ear trumpet.

Bouchier covered the two Balkan Wars as well as the First World War. He worked tirelessly to get Bulgaria to enter the war on the side of the allies. He knew that Bulgaria would side with whoever would guarantee an outcome that would include integrating Macedonia into Bulgaria. Both sides were interested in courting Bulgaria, if only to ensure Bulgaria's large army would not be used against it. The price was, of course, Macedonia. The Central Powers were willing to offer, not just Macedonia, but Thrace as well. The Allies were willing to offer parts of Thrace and what ever parts of Macedonia Serbia was willing to give up, following its success in the Second Balkan War in 1913.

Following World War One, Bulgaria lost nearly all the gains it had made by entering the war in 1915 at the signing of the treaty of Neuilly, in 1919. Bulgaria was not represented at the treaty negotiations. However, Bouchier acted as an unofficial representative. He moved into rooms in Paris and argued with whoever would talk to him that Bulgaria was only a belligerent because of its unfulfilled national destiny, the integration of all Bulgarian people, including those in Macedonia. It was the losses of the Second Balkan War of 1913 that caused it to join the Central Powers. Had the allies offered them what was rightly theirs, he argued, Bulgaria would not have joined the other side. It was a matter of justice and freedom for a people. he maintained, were ethnic Bulgarians but had never been allowed to live together as Bulgarians, except for a brief period following the treaty of San Stefano. In a letter to the Times in January 1919, he wrote that the question being dealt with at the peace conference was one of 'ethnography, not rewards and punishments, and since it was so, Bulgaria's rightful claim to Macedonia, were not to be disregarded.'¹³

He had left Bulgaria when it joined the war, and reported for the Times from Ukraine and Russia, before returning to London. He retired from the Times in 1918 and so, presumably, felt free to argue what he perceived as the rightness of the Bulgarian cause. The writer and journalist, Robert Kaplan, in his book, Balkan Ghost, compares Bouchier's role at the peace conference to that of T.E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, with his arguments for the future independence of Arabia.¹⁴ He is correct in that they were both lone voices, arguing for a cause that no one was interested in anymore. Even more poignant was that while Bouchier probably knew more about Bulgaria and the Balkans than anyone else at the Conference, he was never consulted:

¹³ Quoted in Pandev and Alexandrov the Times correspondent Reporting from Sofia, Sofia, 1993, p 10

¹⁴ Kaplan p 230

The reason is not far to seek. Bouchier was looked on as the champion of an ex-enemy country, and all that he has to say was discounted and discredited in advance.¹⁵

With his pension from the Times, Bouchier planned to write books, including a memoir, dividing his time between his Kilkenny home, London and Sofia. He purchased some land in Sofia on which he planned to build a house, named the Curragh. Bouchier's health was not good, but he gave himself no rest. In Ireland he wrote articles for reviews, all dealing with the future of the Balkans. He even spent some time in a Dublin nursing home before returning to Bulgaria.

Bouchier was born into the Anglo Irish in the mid 19th century, with all that implies as far as class, position, and political opinions. However, as history shows such generalizations do not always apply. There was another factor, his living in England from the time he went to Cambridge and then to Eton to teach. In the absence of biographical material, one biography, and diaries that record little more than dates and appointments, it is not fanciful to suggest that Bouchier's support for and strong advocacy of Bulgarian independence and for the freedom of Macedonia and earlier, Crete, was influenced by his own experiences.

Bouchier was a typical product of his class. He identified with Britain and never seemed to allude to his Irish birth. Those he met were not necessarily struck by his Irishness. His biographer, Lady Grogan, suggests he had some stereotypical qualities, which she ascribed to his being Irish, such as gregariousness. In his writings, with the exception of some early pieces he wrote while still at Eton, he never wrote nor made comparisons with Ireland. Lady Grogan, commenting on how much he enjoyed returning to Ireland suggests 'Bouchier always loved Ireland, possibly all the more because he was quite out of touch with Irish politics'¹⁶. Grogan, curiously, diminishes any influence Ireland may have had on Bouchier. She mentions a few early articles concerning Ireland and then views it as a place where Bouchier would spend a restful annual holiday and nothing else. Comments by the British Ambassador to Bulgaria, quoted below, would seem to suggest that contrary to Grogan's view, Bouchier had a keen interest in events in Ireland. Whatever about the extent of his interest in Ireland, it is not too fanciful to speculate as to what affect his background had on his thinking, There was nothing like going to England for the Anglo Irish to realise how different the Irish part of their identity made them. It also true that the Anglo Irish or Ascendancy were not English. As the Nationalist literary figure, Daniel Corkery wrote:

It would be well for all outsiders who would understand Ireland and its tragic history, or indeed any phase of it, always to keep before them the fact that the Ascendancy mind is not the same thing as the English mind¹⁷.

¹⁵ Grogan p 186

¹⁶ Grogan p 83

¹⁷ Corkery, 1924, p 9

Acceptance in Britain on equal terms was not always the case for the Anglo Irish. William Howard Russell craved that acceptance by the British establishment, and, despite the immense influence of his journalism, it only came late and somewhat reluctantly. In 1853, a British captain in the Crimea war, writing home, gives an indication of how he was perceived by the English establishment, saying Russell was:

a vulgar low Irishman...but he has the gift of the gab, uses his pen as well as his tongue, sings a good song, drinks anyone's brandy and water and smokes as many cigars as foolish young officers will let him, and is looked by most in camp as a Jolly Good Fellow. He is just the sort to get information, particularly out of the youngsters. And I assure you more than one "Nob" has thought it best to give him a shake of the hand rather than the cold shoulder *en passant*, for [he] is rather an awkward gentleman to be on bad terms with'¹⁸

So working either at the heart of empire in London or in North Africa or other theatres of imperial adventure, or in the case of Bourchier, in the Balkans, the Irish journalist is an outsider because of his Irishness or because of his politics, all of which forces him to be detached, objective. Irish journalists at home and abroad were often forced to adopt a detachment that allowed them to go about their job even when their own politics clashed with the politics of the publication. This was clearly the case for Bourchier who so often differed in his views of the Balkans from both that of the Times and especially the British government to the extent that following the First World War he was a champion of one of the enemy states.

Sir Shane Leslie nicely summed up the ambiguity of the establishment towards both the Irish and journalists in a quote, that given Bourchier's career, he might have found amusing. Leslie declared that

The Etonian is the most marked among the types that spring out of the public school. He is the caste composed of ruling and adventurous, half educated but honourable men. All professions accept his leadership except journalism and stock jobbing, which, as subsidiary to literature and commerce, are largely left to Celts and Jews.¹⁹

¹⁸ quoted in de Burgh, H, 2000, p. 34.

¹⁹ Leslie, 1916 p. 47. I am grateful to Professor Tadhg Foley of NUI, Galway, for drawing this to my attention.

Bourchier's championing of small nations, such as Crete, and, most importantly, Bulgaria, was not unique, though his understanding and identification with the Bulgarian and Macedonian peasantry was. His knowledge of Bulgarian and Greek, his understanding of customs and traditions and the feelings of Bulgarians towards him would indicate more than a fashionable obsession with the Other. It could well be that his Irishness, and being an outsider, allowed him a different and very non-English view of the Balkans, permitting him to see the world through the eyes of others. His view was not just romantic, but also political, in terms of independence, liberty and democracy, and also cultural, views that would also be at variance with the majority of his own class at home in Ireland.

Only days before he died, he was asked to give an address to a Macedonian delegation. He thanked them for their appreciation of his efforts 'for the cause of justice and freedom', continuing:

The principles of autonomy and self-determination, proclaimed by President Wilson and accepted with enthusiasm by all the statesmen of Europe, have been rejected by those to whom Providence has entrusted the sacred duty of providing for the welfare and future happiness of the Balkan people. In no single instance has the right of plebiscite been accorded to any of those people. To find a parallel for the crime, which has been committed in, the dismemberment of your country we must go back to the partition of Poland in the 18th century. Poland has waited and the day of her liberation has come. Be assured that the day of freedom will also dawn for Macedonia.²⁰

The day before he died he visited Sir Arthur Peel at the British legation. According to Sir Arthur's memo to the Foreign Office following Bourchier's death the two men spoke for about an hour about 'the Irish question', indicating his continued interest in his native country. Sir Arthur, voicing the suspicion with which the British establishment now held Bourchier, wrote:

I took the opportunity to speak about the responsibility of journalism and the necessity in the present state of affairs to allay as much as possible the feelings of strife and passion aroused by the events of the war and I was glad to find that he was in cordial agreement with me on this point as he said that for that very reason he had refused an invitation he had received from the Executive Committee of the Macedonian Societies.²¹

Whatever he told Sir Arthur the above address to the Macedonian delegation indicates his real view, that Bulgaria was badly treated following the war. He was not above, at least addressing the passions raised by what was perceived as unfair treatment of Bulgaria in the post war settlement of the Balkans.

A year earlier a former British Ambassador, H Dering, writing back to the foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon, gave an indication of Bourchier's standing in Bulgaria. The tone

²⁰ Quoted in Grogan, op cit., p 204

²¹ Op cit

of the note is sarcastic and Bouchier clearly irritated the Ambassador, holding views contrary to the official policy of the British government. There is a clear view that the Ambassador considered he had gone native.

Mr J D Bouchier (happily now longer in the service of that journal), who after too long a residence in Bulgaria had learned to regard himself as infallible and possibly owing to his growing aural infirmity, was apt to grasp only one side of a question- that which appealed to him personally- and was consequently unsuited to instruct public opinion. I say the above advisedly, being aware that in many localities in this country the name of Bouchier is revered as that of a lover of Bulgaria. At one village a bed where he slept is, I am credibly informed, regarded as almost a shrine where one would expect to find candles burning²²

After his death, there were many tributes to Bouchier. Former prime ministers of both Greece and Bulgaria described him as a friend of their respective countries. In Bulgaria he continued to be remembered and even as late as 1983, the official Sofia Press published The Times Correspondent Reporting from Sofia, a collection of Bouchier's articles, mainly used to argue for the incorporation of Macedonia in to Bulgaria. According to the introduction, 'Bulgaria cherishes the sacred memory of James Bouchier.'²³ The collection was declared a modest tribute to his work as a 'journalist and a humane man, a champion of the oppressed and a fighter for equality in relations among the peoples of the Balkan Peninsula.'²⁴ In the end, this remarkable journalist, scion of the Anglo Irish, was commemorated by Kings, peasants, politicians and even the Communist authorities of Bulgaria. In recent years he has been remembered by his own country. The first Irish Ambassador to be resident in Sofia, Mr Geoffrey Keating has organised a number events around Bouchier and has led an annual wreath laying at his grave at Rila monastery. An exhibition of documents pertaining to Bouchier from the Bulgarian National Library have been exhibited at the National Library of Ireland and there are plans for a commemorative plaque to Bouchier in Ireland, though it will be funded by the Bulgarian Government.

Biography

Michael Foley is head of the Department of Communications and Journalism at the Dublin Institute of Technology. This article was researched while working on an EU journalism education project at Sofia University, Bulgaria.

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²² National Archive London PRO FO 3605

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²⁴ *ibid*

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