

FOREWORD

‘It’s a young man’s book,’ Donn Byrne’s son said to me when I told him that I had loved *Messer Marco Polo* since I first came across it when I was a boy. And he was right. Although ostensibly narrated by a very old Irish storyteller, and despite the fact that its author was himself not particularly young – he was over thirty – when the book was written, it does have a poetic freshness which, like morning dew, is apt to disappear in the heat of life’s business.

Byrne’s biography can be quickly summarised. He came from a very old Irish family of the traditional wandering fighting kind; two of his ancestors were generals in Spain and in Austria. His father, having an idiosyncratic interest in bridges, had crossed the Atlantic to look at one in the Genesee Valley, so it happened that Brian Oswald Donn-Byrne, as he was christened, was born in America, on November 20 1889. A couple of months later they went back to Ireland, where Brian grew up, mainly in the countryside among people who still spoke the Irish language. At Dublin University he studied Irish literature and Romance languages,

Then he drifted back to America. In New York he made a living, precarious at first but soon quite successful, selling poems and short stories to the magazines.

What he wrote, as the market required, were for the most part war stories and brisk contemporary narratives, while his own inclination tended always to the mistier regions of Celtic romanticism. Among the projects he nursed was the story of Marco Polo, which he had first read in ancient manuscripts at the University. He toyed with the idea of writing it as a poem, then as a play, finally settling on highly coloured prose as the best medium: and at last he found a sympathetic editor, who commissioned it. Putting it into the mouth of an Irish teller of folk-stories allowed him to indulge in historical diversions and

anachronisms; for example, he wanted to introduce the poet Li Po, who actually belonged to a different dynasty.

The whole idea does indeed seem very odd – the story of Marco Polo told in an Irish accent! And an accent, simply, is all it is. As his gratified editor observed, not a line of it is written in dialect, and yet such is the artistry of sentence structure, and such a distillation of the spirit of Antrim, that one can hardly read it aloud without attempting the voice of old Malachi.

The whole effect is almost impossible to describe, but the book was immediately recognised by non-realist literary writers, by James Branch Cabell, for example, and later by the Irish politician and diplomat Shane Leslie, as a kind of masterpiece. Brian was now selling everything he wrote, and at very handsome prices: but he and his wife, Dorothea, known as Dolly, whom he had first met at Dublin University and had married in America, lived extravagantly beyond their income. He decided they must go back to Europe. He sold their house in Connecticut for just enough to pay off the creditors, and a magazine editor generously paid him \$2,000 in advance. So the family moved across the Atlantic, alternating between England and Ireland, while Brian wrote assiduously and travelled both on the Continent and in the Middle East. Two full-length historical novels resulted – *Brother Saul* about the life of St Paul and *Crusade* about an Irish knight who converts to Islam.

Brian, said one of his friends, ‘hated democracy, prohibition, machine civilisation’. He didn’t like the modern world nor, though he was certainly an Irish nationalist, did he like what Ireland was becoming. He liked fishing and boxing and horses and gambling, and he rented an old castle beside the sea in County Cork. One night in Cannes he won more than £2,000 at the Casino’s high table: he used the money to buy Coolmain Castle outright. As Shane Leslie remarked, many an Irish castle had been lost at the gaming tables but the reverse procedure was unusual.

For the last seven years of his life he was quite well off and enjoyed himself to the full. One night in 1926, just after he bought Coolmain, he went for a drive before dinner. Dolly said she was too tired to go with him. He never returned. His car, which proved to have defective steering, pitched off the road into the wild waters of Courtmacsherry Bay at high tide.

Of the considerable body of work which Donn Byrne produced in a relatively short life the Irish stories keep their particular admirers and *Brother Saul* is a fine book, but there can be no doubt that *Messer Marco Polo* will always be his best remembered, his unique, achievement. The historically curious may ask: how much does it resemble the true story of Marco Polo? And the perhaps surprising answer is – quite closely.

That Marco Polo did what he said he did and in general saw what he said he saw has never been very seriously questioned. The claim, in the prologue to his own book, that its author had travelled more widely than any other man since the Creation, was, as far as written records are concerned, plain fact. In the year 1271, aged seventeen, he set out with his father and uncle for China, served Kubla Khan in various roles, travelled widely in Central Asia, visited India and Burma, and after twenty years returned, almost unrecognisable but laden with jewels, to Venice. When subsequently he was made a prisoner-of-war in Genoa he met a romance writer named Rustichello. They sent for Marco's notes and, between them, compiled the narrative of his travels. No copy of the original text, which was probably in French, survives, but several almost contemporary copies, in various languages (including, as it happens, Irish) do. The love story in *Messer Marco Polo* is Donn Byrne's invention, but much else – the visit to the Pope, for example, and the tale of the Old Man of the Mountain and his assassins – come straight out of the Polo-Rustichello book.

A good deal has quite recently been confirmed from Chinese sources, Did Marco and Rustichello, and in due course Donn

Byrne, exaggerate from time to time, did they embellish their anecdotes a little here and there? Of course they did. What far-traveller from Herodotus onwards has ever failed to do so? Does it matter? Not a scrap. The important thing is that Marco Polo's great book has here inspired a wonderful small book. 'Young men see visions and old men dream dreams.' These are what matter, not the prosaic accidents of historic truth.

Anthony Lejeune
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