

Benjamin Farrington

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Benjamin Farrington (1891-1974) taught successively in Belfast, Dublin, Cape Town, Bristol and finally Swansea, where he was Professor of Classics from 1936 until his retirement in 1956. Farrington was a pioneer in the study of ancient science, and his book *Greek Science and its Meaning for Us*, published by Penguin in 1944 and 1949, was for long the standard work on the subject. Both his interest in science and his choice of a mass-market publisher reflect left-wing views which placed him in a very small minority of classical scholars in his generation, and now make his life and work well worth exploring. References to his life and work have been few, and mostly brief.¹

Farrington was born in Cork in 1891 and studied at University College Cork and then at Trinity College Dublin. His subjects included both Classics and Middle English, and he wrote a graduate thesis at Cork on Shelley's translations from Greek. He was in Dublin during the lock-out strike of 1913,

¹ E.g. the passing reference in Edith Hall, "Christopher Caudwell's Greek and Latin Classics," 242. The most accessible account of his life is Benferhat, "Benjamin Farrington," 314-15. I am indebted to the following for help of various kinds: John Atkinson, Jane Bernal, Tom Buchanan, Daryl Leeworthy, Geoffrey Lloyd, Carole McCallum, Alan Sandry, Jane Straker, Dan Tompkins, Isabelle Torrance.

when he was very impressed by the oratory of James Connolly, a trade union leader who was later executed for his role in the 1916 Easter Rising.² In 1946, thirty years later, Farrington gave a talk on “The Challenge of Socialism” at a weekend summer school in Dublin. In it he stated:

All through my years as a university student I had been studying the history of thought. Nobody before Connolly had brought home to me that the history of thought does not exist in isolation but is part of the history of the society in which the thought is produced [...]. It is to a workingman [thus] that I owe the conviction that learning need not be pedantic or obscurantist but a guide to action in the present.³

Farrington’s radicalism probably influenced his choice of Shelley’s translations from Greek literature as the subject of his graduate thesis in 1917. After a few years in Belfast as assistant to the professor of Classics, the ancient historian Sir Samuel Dill, Farrington taught at the University of Cape Town from 1920 to 1934; he was promoted in 1922 and given a chair of Latin in 1930. In Cape Town he proselytised for Sinn Féin and proposed the foundation of an Irish World Organization to support the new Republic of Ireland. Returning to the UK in 1935, after a brief period in Bristol Farrington was appointed to the chair of Classics in University College Swansea, as it then was, in 1936. He remained there until his retirement twenty years later.

Colonial universities offered a useful field for young British academics, and Farrington was not the only one to look there to escape the crowded job market in this country. In 1933 there were 24 candidates for the chair of Classics at Swansea, including some whose names were later well known: R. G. Austin, A.H.M. Jones, W.S. Maguiness. The successful candidate was R. B. Onians, who soon moved to a chair in London. In 1936 there were again 24 candidates, including R. G. Austin again. The most intriguing name is that of J.

² Anderson, *James Connolly and the Irish Left*.

³ Farrington, “The Challenge of Socialism,” 13. Cf. Edith Hall, “Sinn Féin and Ulysses: Between Professor Robert Mitchell Henry and James Joyce,” 196.

E. Powell of Trinity College Cambridge, better known later on as Enoch Powell. Farrington's election must have been influenced by the glowing testimonials he sent in from Bristol and from Cape Town, which made it clear that he was both an excellent scholar and a very supportive colleague.⁴

In his application, Farrington wrote that he “suffered from the lack of contact with other scholars engaged in classical studies and the impossibility of utilising large libraries except in fleeting visits to Europe.” At this point A. E. Housman's only postgraduate student, William Semple, thought of applying to Cape Town, but Housman warned him that the library might be inadequate.⁵ Farrington himself had made several trips to Britain in the 1920s and early 1930s to work in libraries here. Another reason for leaving South Africa was that the government was beginning to develop the apartheid policies that continued to harden in the 1940s. Farrington, Ruth Schechter and their friends were strong supporters of racial equality, but the prospects on this front must have seemed very dim. He had already decided to leave South Africa in 1933. In the following year he was offered a contract to write a book on science in antiquity for the Home University Library, and planned to come back to Britain to write it. When he sent in his text, he had an enthusiastic response from Julian Huxley, the Library's science editor. At this point Gilbert Murray was also one of the Library's editors, but they seem not to have been in contact - at least there is no trace of Farrington in Murray's papers.

Farrington started at the University of Cape Town as a lecturer in Greek, then was promoted to senior lecturer, then in 1930 became professor of Classics with special reference to Latin. His first book, *Primum Graius Homo*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1927, reflected both his interest in translation and his knowledge of both classical languages: it was an anthology

⁴ In 1936 the candidates were A. H. Armstrong, R. G. Austin, J. A. Davison, G. B. A. Fletcher, R. J. Getty, W. F. J. Knight, L. J. D. Richardson, J. E. Powell, P. T. Stevens, H. D. Westlake, and E. C. Woodcock.

⁵ Stray, “Housman and W.H. Semple: a newly-discovered correspondence”.

of translations from Greek into Latin. His title was taken from Lucretius' reference to Epicurus:

Humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret
in terris oppressa gravi sub religione,
quae caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat
horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans,
primum Graius homo mortalis tollere contra
est oculos ausus primusque obsistere contra;
quem neque fama deum nec fulmina nec minitanti
murmure compressit caelum.

When man's life lay for all to see foully grovelling upon the ground, crushed beneath the weight of Superstition, which displayed her head from the regions of heaven, lowering over mortals with horrible aspect, a man of Greece was the first that dared to uplift mortal eyes against her, the first to make stand against her; for neither fables of the gods could quell him, nor thunderbolts, nor heaven with menacing roar.⁶

His next book was very different: *Samuel Butler and the Odyssey*.⁷ It is not clear what prompted Farrington to write this book, which basically supported Butler's identification of the author of the *Odyssey* with a young woman who lived in Trapani in western Sicily. In its bold eccentricity, it can be seen as declaring Farrington's marginal position in the classical establishment, just as Butler's own book had made a similar declaration of his own marginality. In Farrington's case, this marginality could be seen to involve his geographical position, his focus on ancient science and his left-wing politics.

Farrington's Latin work on Latin texts in Cape Town included studies of postclassical writing and continued his interest in translation. He began by translating a life of the sixteenth-century physician Andreas Vesalius, the founder of modern human anatomy. The seventeenth-century Latin original was the work of the Dutch scholars Hermann Boerhaave and Bernhard

⁶ *De Rerum Natura* 1.62-69. Translated by W. H. D. Rouse and revised by Martin F. Smith. Loeb Classical Library.

⁷ London: Jonathan Cape, 1929; cf. Whitmarsh, "What Samuel Butler saw".

Albinus; the translation was published by the Royal Society of South Africa in 1930. The Dutch connection perhaps arose from the history of the Cape Colony, established by the Dutch East India Company in the mid-seventeenth century. This was certainly the case with Farrington's second translation from Latin, which appeared in 1933: *Early Writings on Hottentots by Dutch Settlers*. This included three seventeenth-century accounts of the Hottentots, two in Latin and one in Dutch, all written by Dutch travellers to the Cape. On this book Farrington collaborated as editor and translator with his University of Cape Town colleague the anthropologist Isaac Schapera.

His next two books were different both from these and from one another. *Science in Antiquity*, published by Oxford University Press in 1936, appeared in the Home University Library series and was a basic introductory text. *Science and Politics in the Ancient World*, published in 1939, was provocative and argumentative. In the *Classical Review*, Keith Guthrie wrote:

Professor Farrington succeeds in evoking hearty agreement, in exhilarating, tantalizing and annoying. [...]

We are tantalized because his case is so nearly good, and might have been very good. If only he would avoid ridiculous overstatements bound to alienate [...]. Lastly, the book annoys, because [...] it abounds in misleading statements or half-truths.⁸

One source of exhilaration was surely the clarity of his style. A good example can be found in this book. The heading of his second chapter, entitled "The geometer-God," reads: "In this chapter it appears that arithmetic is democratic, geometry oligarchic, and that God prefers the latter."

Farrington, then, wrote both introductory books and argumentative books, and some of the former were written from a left-wing perspective. An example of this is his *The Civilisation of Greece and Rome*, published in 1938 by Gollancz, who included it in their Left Book Club. Clearly the politics of

⁸ Guthrie, Review of Farrington, *Science and Politics in the Ancient World*.

knowledge lay at the centre of Farrington's interests; and it underpinned his later books on Francis Bacon and Charles Darwin.⁹ This was not just an intellectual pursuit. As a young man in Dublin he had been a committed member of Sinn Féin, and when he went to Cape Town, he tried to set up a world Irish organisation; he also founded and edited a fortnightly magazine, *The Republic*, for the Irish population of South Africa, which ran for two years. An Irish republican was bound to feel sympathy for the Boers, similarly oppressed by the British state, but the oppression of the black population by Afrikaners soon dissolved this sympathy. Farrington's radical views led him to join left-wing groups in Cape Town, and in particular an intellectual salon run by Ruth Schechter. She was the daughter of the leading Hebrew scholar Solomon Schechter, since famous for his work on the Cairo Genizah, the collection of over 400,000 manuscript fragments found in the store room of a synagogue in Cairo. She was married when she met Farrington, but she left her husband for him, and she and Farrington then married, and by 1935 were back in the UK together.

We have already seen how Farrington's politics interacted with his scholarship. In Cape Town he had got to know other left-wingers, including the zoologist Lancelot Hogben and the Germanist Frederick Bodmer. Back in the UK he became friendly with his near-contemporary Eric Dodds, another Irishman and supporter of Sinn Féin; as an Oxford undergraduate Dodds had been rusticated for a year over his support for the Easter Rising of 1916. Their relationships can be followed in Farrington's letters to Dodds, now in the Bodleian Library. Their correspondence shows a tension arising from the fact that Farrington was a dogmatic Marxist and Dodds was not, though this was resolved by their mutual respect. A similar issue arose in the Farringtons' relations with their close friends in Cape Town, Julius and Eleanor Lewin, who were Fabian socialists. After Ruth died, Farrington wrote to the Lewins:

⁹ Farrington, Francis Bacon, *What Darwin Really Said*.

We were not seeing eye to eye with you two, owing to our development, and that sometimes put a critical note into our intercourse. [...] We didn't, and I don't, like liberals. But all the same you were among the dearest friends we had.¹⁰

In a way this parallels the relationship between George Thomson, the Marxist professor of Greek at Birmingham, and Francis Cornford of Cambridge. Thomson was much further left of centre than Cornford, and also prone to take up extreme positions and hold to them in the face of contrary evidence. Dodds, Farrington and Thomson were all members of the Britain-China Friendship Association, which supported what seemed to be a new kind of socialist life. In 1952 they were all part of a BCFA delegation that went on a visit to China, from which they reported back. In Thomson's case this was linked to a split in the British Communist Party in which members gave allegiance to Russia or China after the Sino-Soviet split of the 1950s. Farrington left the Communist Party after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. Thomson and Farrington both chose China: Farrington praised Mao's "extraordinary grasp of the details of concrete social reality".¹¹

The subject of Farrington's inaugural lecture at Swansea, delivered on 10 November 1936, has sometimes been identified as the history of ancient slavery, a lecture later reprinted in his *Head and Hand in Ancient Greece: Four Studies in the Social Relations of Thought* (1947); it was in fact the first-century BC universal historian Diodorus Siculus. Farrington may have been attracted by Diodorus's humanism, and the topic will have resonated with his earlier attempt to set up a global organisation for Irish republicans. But his Marxist convictions can also be seen in the text of his lecture.

We have seen that one of Farrington's books was published in the Left Book Club series. The Club had a large number of local branches which held discussion meetings, and Farrington was very active in the Swansea branch,

¹⁰ Farrington to Julius and Eleanor Lewin, 8 July 1943. Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, 227-8, gives the text of this letter but omits this paragraph.

¹¹ See Farrington's reviews of successive volumes of Mao's Selected Works in *Labour Monthly*, 1954: T. Buchanan, East Wind, 144.

which was for some time run by Ruth Farrington. Other local discussions included those run by the university philosophy department; at one of them Farrington had an argument with Ludwig Wittgenstein. This will have been in 1943, when Wittgenstein was in Swansea visiting his friend and ex-pupil Rush Rhees. The Farringtons lived at no 4 Cwmdonkin Terrace, just over the road from Dylan Thomas's family home in Cwmdonkin Drive; Wittgenstein was staying at no. 2, and got on very well with the family at no. 1, playing with their two daughters, aged ten and twelve, who called him "Vicky". What I don't know is what contact if any Wittgenstein and Farrington had in this domestic setting.

E. R. Dodds' papers throw considerable light on their relationship, and also on the current situation of other scholars. In July 1936 the German refugee Friedrich Solmsen told Dodds he had heard from Farrington that the council of Swansea College were refusing to consider job applications from foreigners.¹² This was an extreme position; several other institutions accepted application from foreigners, but never appointed them. Left-wing beliefs were also a common disqualification. In 1953, for example, Robert Browning failed to obtain a fellowship at Balliol because of his Marxist views and membership of the Communist Party. Browning ended up at Birkbeck, an internally marginal college in London, where in the late 1960s he was briefly my supervisor. In April 1940 Farrington consulted Dodds about his intention to apply for a post at Johns Hopkins. He was concerned that his politics might block an appointment. "I think you may feel bound, if asked, to say I am a red..."¹³ The Johns Hopkins archives report no trace of Farrington, so it looks as if he decided not to apply.

In August 1944 Farrington told Dodds that their friendship was in danger. "You thought my politics a great danger to this country, I thought the same of you." He began his letter as usual, "Dear Dodds", but signed "Ben". Later letters are similarly signed but also begin "Dear Eric".¹⁴ This was significant - Dodds

¹² Solmsen to Dodds, 31 July 1936.

¹³ Farrington to Dodds, 8 April 1940.

¹⁴ Farrington to Dodds, 4 August 1944.

disliked his first name, and the only other person who addressed him this way was his aunt.

In the following year their disagreements surfaced again: Farrington wrote in September 1945:

Today I think Stalin incomparably the greatest political brain on earth. He has more grasp of history and present fact, more lucidity, more candour and more vision than any other. I also think that he would not be what he is if he were not moulded by the writings of Marx and Engels and Lenin. I think this is an entirely reasonable judgment. It is of just the same sort as your judgment on Fraenkel as a scholar or mine on yourself - a judgment now established but constantly being refined by further experience.¹⁵

The Farringtons had joined the Communist Party in 1936 after being convinced by the promulgation of Stalin's Constitution of 1936, promising universal suffrage and total equality for all. The historian Isaac Deutscher called this "a veil of liberal phrases and premises over the guillotine in the background"; it was soon followed by the great terror in which $\frac{3}{4}$ million people were killed, and a million more sent to gulags. This was of course in the period when Russia was seen as an ally against the growing threat of Nazi Germany.

In 1946, Dodds challenged Farrington to put his loyalty to the academic pursuit of knowledge before his Communist beliefs. He replied:

Yes, I do unreservedly subscribe to the principle that the University comes before Party and that it would be wrong to "pack" the University with Party men. [...] It is a practice with me to impart to my students agreed and traditional knowledge rather than any controversial speculations of my own. I think my Home University Library book [*Science in Antiquity*] suitable for students because it is fairly traditional and has been generally approved. I do not think *Science and Politics* a

¹⁵ Farrington to Dodds, Sept. 1945.

book for students but for the general public. It is too polemical for educational purposes, in my view.¹⁶

This was a decisive shift which split his life into two parts, the radical campaigning and the neutral teaching. Overarching principle had given way to pragmatism.

After she arrived in Swansea in 1935 Ruth Farrington was politically very active, giving talks to the Workers Educational Association (WEA) and other left-wing educational bodies, and touring the valleys to meet working men's groups. She remained till her death a devotee of Soviet communism. She died prematurely in 1942 and Farrington remarried in 1943. On Ruth's death Farrington took in another Irishman as a lodger - Edward Thompson, who had been brought in from Dublin to teach Greek after members of the Classics staff were called up. This meant Farrington could avoid having an unknown billeted on him. The two men became firm friends, and Farrington was responsible for converting Thompson to Marxism. Thompson, who became the first professor of Classics at Nottingham, went on to be a pioneering historian of late antiquity.¹⁷

One of the consequences of Farrington's close relationships with left-wing scholars and scientists was that he belonged to an interdisciplinary community. The scientific members of this community have been very well discussed by Gary Werskey in his book *The Visible College*, whose title plays on the description of the precursors of the Royal Society as an invisible college.¹⁸ Several of the members of the Visible College (men like Huxley, Hogben and Bernal) were well known to Farrington, and his links with them sat comfortably with his work on the history of science. So well known was he in this field that when the British Society for the History of Science was founded in 1947, he was chosen to address its inaugural meeting. In his

¹⁶ Farrington to Dodds, 4 March 1946.

¹⁷ Markus, "Edward Arthur Thompson".

¹⁸ Werskey, *The Visible College*.

address he stressed the importance of technology, the mastery of the physical world, as a good Marxist would, and came into conflict with Herbert Dingle, recently appointed the first professor of the history of science in the UK, whose inaugural lecture had focused on scientific knowledge rather than its uses. Dingle himself was a well-known controversialist, known for the rejection of the special theory of relativity - a position in which he had no supporters. As so often, the history of humanities is much less well developed than that of science, but Edith Hall and Henry Stead have identified Farrington along with George Thomson, Robert Browning, Frank Walbank and Geoffrey de Ste Croix as left-wing scholars who deserve to be considered together.¹⁹ Some of them belonged to an ancient history subsection of the History Group of the Communist Party.

Let me end by quoting from two obituaries of Farrington, both of them, as it happens, written by Cambridge classical knights. The first is by the distinguished historian of ancient philosophy Sir Geoffrey Lloyd, who is celebrated for his work on early Chinese philosophy, early Greek thought and the comparison of the two:

His publications were [...] of a quite exceptional range [...]. But Farrington's work is remarkable not only for its range and extent, but also for its readability. He employed a formidable learning with wit and imagination. It is true that Farrington's enthusiasms occasionally ran away with him. [...] In Greek Science Archimedes has less space than Vitruvius, and in general mathematics and the exact sciences hardly receive the attention they deserve [...]. But Farrington's major contribution [is] to provide a model of what the history of ancient science can be when it is treated, as is surely should be, not just as intellectual history, but a part of social history itself and a basic one at that.

¹⁹ Hall and Stead, *A People's History of Classics*, 483-4 (but absent from the index).

Lloyd also comments on the man himself, whom he only met twice: “[...] brief as my acquaintance with him was, his openness, kindness and friendliness made a deep impression on me.”²⁰

The same impression is conveyed by the obituary of Farrington by another leading Cambridge classicist, the ancient historian Sir Moses Finley:

He defended his ideas firmly, with a quiet, and sometimes biting wit, but never in anger. He preferred a restatement of what he understood and believed to combative polemics. His elegant clarity of style never deserted him, nor did his talent for long-lasting friendships.²¹

The warmth of Finley’s obituary is striking.

Finally, I quote from the person who knew him best, Ruth Schechter, in a letter written in 1932:

I love your hands and your laugh and your body and the way you sit and read. I love your wit and your good-tempered daily living and your courting and your heavenly good manners of the heart. But most I love something in you both strong and delicate, not easy to put into words, a sort of patience and disciplined harmony of the intellect, a steady determined tempering of your mind and spirit, a persistent yet spontaneous continuous education of yourself, that lies deep and fixed beneath any superficial uncertainties and frights.²²

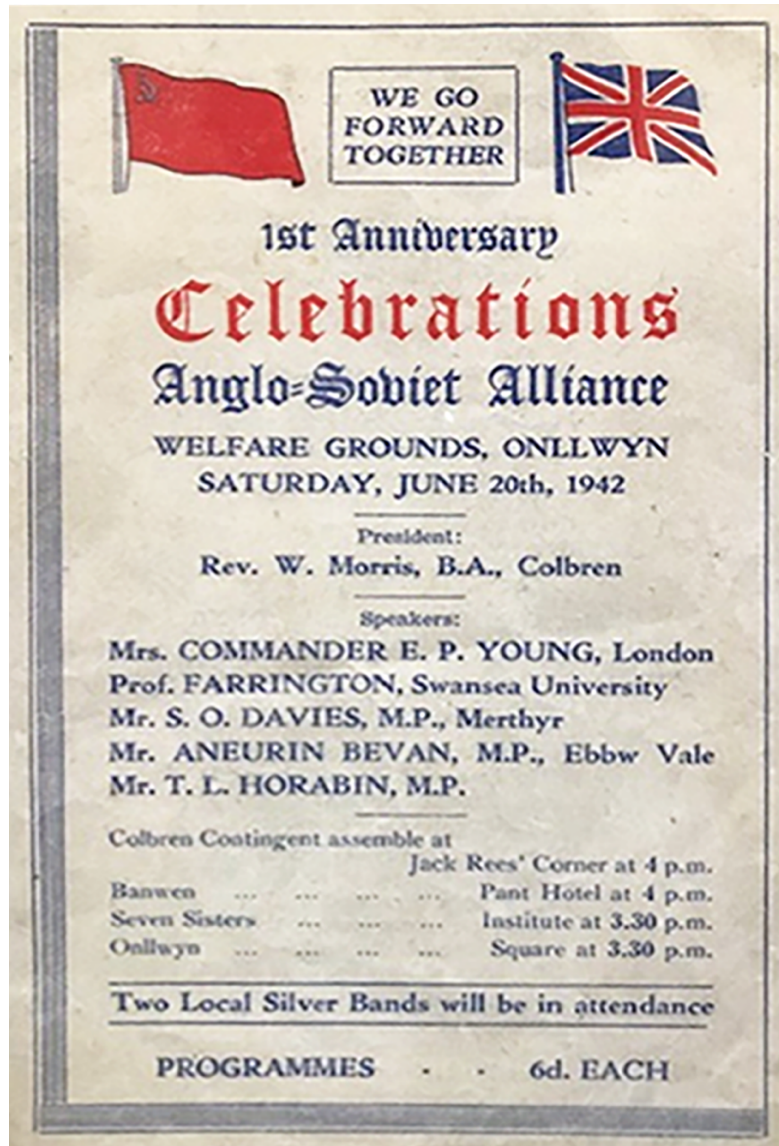
“Good manners of the heart” is a nice phrase: Ruth may have been thinking of Goethe’s statement that “there is a courtesy of the heart that is a kind of love”.

I hope to have given a sense of Farrington and his work, and to have persuaded my readers that this is a man who deserves to be remembered.

²⁰ Lloyd, “In Memoriam Benjamin Farrington,” 159-60.

²¹ M.I. Finley, “Obituary: Prof B. Farrington”.

²² B. Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals*, 152-3.



Anglo-Soviet banner advertising an Anglo-Soviet Alliance meeting in 1942, at which Farrington spoke. "Mrs Commander Young" was the Czech academic Ira Sindelkova, second wife of Lt Commander Edgar Young (retired 1934, died 1975), who was active in left-wing organisations after his retirement. His papers are now at Hull University Archives (a detailed description at GB50U DYO), and his security service file (1957-1960) at the National Archives, KV 2/3353.

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