

John Cowper Powys and Rabelais

1991 saw the publication of Donald M. Frame's English translation entitled *The Complete Works of François Rabelais* (Berkeley: University of California Press), generally regarded as the best currently available. Admirers of John Cowper Powys will be delighted to read, in his Translator's Note, how he was inspired to undertake the project:

In 1950 I reviewed a book (J. C. Powys, *Rabelais* [London: Bodley Head, 1948]) on R[abelais] that included a partial translation. I undertook to show its quality by comparing it with existing complete versions through a sampling of passages ... in an assessment that I still maintain.

Frame agrees with Powys in finding the "classic" translation by Sir Thomas Urquhart, published in 1653, as "savory and picturesque but too much Urquhart and at times too little R[abelais]" (xxv).

The review in question actually appeared in volume 42 of the *Romanic Review* in December 1951 (287-90). Frame describes Powys's book as "a heady and exuberant introduction to a heady and exuberant writer," praises its "loving insight," and adds:

His ideas in translating Rabelais are excellent ... [Powys's] own aim is the maximum of fidelity without sacrifice of vigor or freshness—as good an aim for a translator as can be imagined."

He points out that Powys did not possess "an unerring knowledge of Rabelais's French," but adds:

All in all ... his translation of about one fourth of Rabelais seems to this reviewer the best we have in English (287).

A few years later, J. M. Cohen's translation appeared in the Penguin Classics edition, which thereupon became the favoured English version, but in his 1991 Note Frame observes that he too lacked familiarity with the nuances in Rabelais's time—going so far as to write of Cohen's "ignorance of sixteenth-century French" (xxvi).

The first paragraph of Frame's review deserves to be quoted in full:

As might be expected, Mr Powys draws Rabelais very much to himself; he makes him very cosmic, very Welsh, and applies to him such pet

dislikes of his own as vivisection. He does not always avoid the faults of the brilliant amateur. But the breadth of his scope and insight goes far beyond most Rabelais scholarship. If there is a lot of himself in his *Rabelais*, there is also a lot of Rabelais, and of the best. (290)

How refreshing to encounter an academic (Frame was at that time teaching at Columbia) who rates him so highly within a scholarly context.

Sadly, although Frame spent most of his professional life on his translation, he did not live to see its publication. He died early in 1991, in the words of Raymond C. La Charité in his “Foreword” (xxi), “after a long debilitating, and often painful series of medical problems” several months before the book finally appeared. The final editing devolved upon others. It is now regarded as an accurate and highly readable English version such as Rabelais clearly deserves, and the fact that JCP played a significant part in nurturing it (typically ignored by the academic La Charité) should not pass unrecorded.

W. J. Keith

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George Lionel Lewin, the Book Discoverer



courtesy the Wikimedia Foundation

Our Jew Book-Peddler who like our Daily-Mail Neighbour (...) came back to Great Russell St to find his home bombed & railed off . . . & who only could get enough to get [to] Wales *without going home* went to Cheltenham en route and walked and walked & walked till footsore; but no shelter: Someone said to him . . . “Go to the Grand Hotel”—he thought it was a joke at his expense: but he went: & found the Government had taken it over . . . and the officer there said . . . “are you an évacué?” our Jew said “Yes” . . . Then the officer said: “a *Self-*

Évacué I suppose?” & our friend confessed that so it was. But he was allowed in—for the officer said: “any one from any bombed area *can stay here a week*; tho’ the people here *are mostly* from Eastbourne”. And our friend had an absolutely new bed & *at once* a perfect *hot bath* (with special soap & towel) a fine supper & a better breakfast . . . but he was ashamed (*with his fare to Wales*) to stay longer & so came on here. He knows ‘*Yiddish*’ very well tho’ not ‘*Hebrew*’ . . . (I think *Yiddish* is a mixture of Hebrew & German, isn’t it?) He says that the Government in London is really taking things in hand now . . . and *all* the unused and empty grand houses in Park Lane and May Fair . . . especially he said in *Curzon St* (where *your great uncle* (as well as *Becky Sharpe*) used to bide! are now filled with homeless East-side people who escaped in a long procession & they are *en masse* now transferred to the grandest part of London . . .

Our friend chuckled when he said: “*Once there* they’ll stay! They’ll *never* get them out!” He says that they’ll [there’ll] be amazing & *unbelievable social changes* after the war. (...)

He had a letter from a friend still there in London wh. he showed us . . . who

is a Pacifist—& he said... “I don’t try to explain why I intend to stick it out except perhaps that in my opinion a pacifist ought to be if possible braver than those who are not Pacifist.”

Our friend carries Coleridge’s poems in his pocket . . . he is particularly fond of Coleridge . . . He said it was a *Co-incident* of Note that after he had just been repeating “where Alph the sacred river ran thro’ caverns measureless to man”¹ he saw Gertrude’s famous Imaginative Picture of that poem in our entrance! (***Letters to Sea-Eagle*², September 24, 1940**)

Our *Mr Lewin* the Jew from the British Museum Russell Square quarter is still here & comes to tea every day. (...) we both really do like Mr Lewin very very much he is so *Light of Weight*: his Personality has no *Powerful Aura*—you just scarce feel his Presence or hardly *know he is there!* But he is like a cinnamon-scented exciting book; for he curses the Nazis and tells thrilling stories and his voice doesn’t seem to come from him but the attenuated funny gnat-like narration proceeds from the air where there is the thin shape of an *aerial Mr Lewin*, holding a pile of books on his lap and a teacup in his hand and a faint voice with a faint accent of the Ghetto of Bagdad about it—like a volume of the Rabbi Gamaliel uttering vague words about extremely exciting events—Yes, as if a book with Hebrew letters on its frontispiece *should speak*—not as loud as Balaam’s Ass³, but as some pet Marmoset of Balaam’s, from its cage, might explain that to Curse the people of the Lord was impossible for its master; and very dangerous for any Prophet! (***Letters to Sea-Eagle*, Oct. 5, 1940**)

Jewish on Both Sides, born in Johannesburg, S. Africa, and by profession a Book Discoverer & Book Dealer, Blitzed out of his collection of books (he’s never had a shop). He is really & truly a most—LOVEABLE—(Think of my being so “lacking” as not to be able to fish up another better & more exactly descriptive word than that! I can’t bother to look it up—)—yes, a very likeable anyway sort of man I have ever known & Phyllis is just as pleased with him & as fond of him. We’ve known him about a year now. He is a great friend of Mr. Lahr⁴ *the* Radical Bookseller. . . . (...) He is like a Butterfly. He has only one passion—for personal liberty & to be free to wander about hunting for manuscripts, old papers, queer books, & queer types of persons. If he could be induced to compose an autobiography—God! ‘twould be a thrilling book—his adventures are incredible. He knows London even better than Mr. Lahr himself.

But I could without Mr. Lewin’s help over getting me the books never have done this Rabelais translation. (...) O *how* badly they pay translators⁵ I now see! & they the honestest & most conscientious of all literary workers as *I now* know! (***Letters to Louis Wilkinson, 1935-1956, Macdonald, 1958, p.133***)

¹ Coleridge, *Kubla Khan*.

² *The Letters of John Cowper Powys to Philippa Powys*, ed. Anthony Head, London: Cecil Woolf, 1996.

³ The diviner Balaam, known for the efficiency of his blessings and curses, was ordered by King Balac to curse Israel. On their way the ass carrying him saw an angel before them and refused to go further. Through his voice the Lord ordered Balaam to obey Him and bless Israel. Old Testament, *Numbers 22-24*.

⁴ See Chris Gostick, *T.F. Powys’s Favourite Bookseller, the Story of Charles Lahr*, Cecil Woolf, 2009

⁵ JCP was paid £30 in 1943 for his *Rabelais*.