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Ronald Ross and his Swiss romance¹

L. J. BRUCE-CHWATT²

This year, 1977, is one of the decennial anniversaries of the discovery of transmission of malaria by *Anopheles*, a date that is generally regarded as a milestone in the history of tropical medicine.

The man responsible for this discovery was more than a physician or a scientist. He was also a soldier, a musician, a mathematician, a dramatist. But Ronald Ross's scientific work and his public health activity overshadowed his artistic achievements which are largely forgotten.

To a historian Ross's literary works, admittedly of uneven quality, are of considerable interest since they offer an insight into the psychological make-up of this strange and complex man. One of the most revealing major romantic works of Ross's is connected with his two visits to Switzerland.

The story of it starts in 1888, when at the age of thirty-one Captain Ronald Ross of the Madras Light Infantry returned to Europe for his first home leave after several years' service in India. He left his ship at Malta and proceeded by easy stages to England via Italy and Switzerland. During his stay in Lucerne he went up the Rigi and there, while gazing at the stupendous, snow-clad peaks, he thought of one of Byron's unfinished poems "Deformed Transformed". He also remembered a recently heard opera by Anton Rubinstein based on Lermontov's ballad: "The Demon". It occurred to the young military doctor, so fond of music and poetry, that the two themes of an evil spirit aspiring to human love could be combined and developed, using the splendid Alpine scenery as a background. But time was pressing and Ross had to return to England.

Back in London he decided to take the new diploma in public health and to study bacteriology under Professor Klein. His progress was slow but he had a

¹ The substance of this paper was presented in 1974 at the Annual Meeting of the Swiss Society of Tropical Medicine in Geneva. It seems that it is appropriate to publish it in 1977 to commemorate the 80th anniversary of Sir Ronald Ross's momentous discovery of 20th August 1897. It is also fitting to regard it as the present author's tribute to Prof. Rudolf Geigy and to the Swiss tropical medicine generally.

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Fig. 1. Ronald Ross in 1895, at the beginning of his work on transmission of malaria. Note the travelling microscope designed by Ross for his field work in India (Library of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine).

valid excuse because in December of that year he became engaged to Miss Rosa Bloxam, whom he married five months later.

At the end of 1889 Ross and Mrs. Ross returned to India, but soon he received orders to go on field service to Burma, in medical charge of the 2nd Regiment Madras Infantry with the Chin-Lushai expedition. It was during the long marches with his regiment and among the tropical scenery that Ross thought out his mediaeval drama. Its basic plot is told in Ross's memoirs:

The time is 1495; an Italian exiled lady, Morva Neroni, has taken refuge in the heart of Switzerland where she has brought up her twin children, Astrella and Zozimo. They are poor and Zozimo works at the Count Reichenfels' inn as a tapster, while Astrella, a divine beauty, is a chamois huntress. Being feeble, dwarfed and deformed, Zozimo is tormented by the Count's servants and especially by the court jester, the hideous Gangogo. But Zozimo is pitied by the



Fig. 2. Ronald Ross and Mrs. Ross in Calcutta in 1898. Standing behind Mrs. Ross is Mohammed Bux, the chief laboratory attendant, whose assistance was often praised in Ross's "Memoirs". In front, cages with birds infected with avian malaria (Library of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine).

Count's daughter Lelita, whom he secretly loves. While in an epileptic fit he is visited by Satan in the form of Count Azriman, who changes him into the handsomest man alive and in this new form Zozimo wins Lelita's hand. Gangogo discovers the truth about Azriman and Zozimo and further complications arise when Cardinal Raffael Bonto comes to expel the evil spirit, though his zeal is shaken by his lustful love for Astrella. But when the evil spirit woos Astrella and is rejected by her, Zozimo is forced back into his old, deformed body. Astrella flies with her brother to the icy peaks of the Galenstock, where both are killed by lightning.

Ross completed this drama in Bangalore in 1890 and gave it Byron's own, though slightly modified title "The Deformed Transformed". He admits in the preface that "the construction of the play may be too gothic for some", yet he hopes "that it may have enough originality to entertain the reader". He had fifty copies printed locally and sent it to four English publishers who refused it. The drama was eventually published by Chapman and Hall in 1892. Of the three hundred copies printed, seventy-six were complimentary and four were sold. But this is not the end of the story!

In 1894 Ronald Ross and his wife left India on his second home leave and after three months' stay in London went to Switzerland in the company of their friends, the Aston-Binns family. They stayed at Kandersteg where Ross preferred fly-fishing to mountain-climbing, as he felt uneasy when looking down from the heights. Here he began to think of rewriting his drama in the form of a mediaeval romance and developing the theme of Satan seeking human love for his own redemption.

On a visit to the Andermatt valley the Rosses stayed at Hospenthal where they were shown the ruin of an old tower that might have been the palace of Count Reichenfels.

From Andermatt, Ross went to Realp, climbed the Tiefen glacier, then down to Grimsel and along the valley of the Aar to Innertkirchen and to Grindelwald. All this led eventually to the lengthy manuscript under the title, "The Revels of Orsera", telling the main story of "The Deformed Transformed".

The plot follows the main episodes of the drama but the narrative shows greater involvement in human emotions and uses all the paraphernalia of a mediaeval allegorical contest for an ideal woman.

There are dream-like descriptions of the solemn grandeur of Alpine peaks, passages studded with stars and moons, clouds and storms, eerie visions of haunted caves, mysterious voices, supernatural encounters, wicked deeds and passionate wooings, all of it leading to a Wagnerian climax.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the book is the appendix under the title "Historical notes". It states that when visiting the library of the University of Basel, Ross read with fascination the "History of Raffaelo Bonto, Cardinal of Parma", written in 1539 by Johan Muren (Johannes Murinus) of Glarus. This ancient manuscript tells a story of the fifteenth century and centres round the figure of a young boy of unknown origin and extraordinary beauty and virtue who, at the age of twenty, was made Cardinal by Pope Sixtus IV and who, later in life, succumbed to corruption and evil powers. Many characters described by Murinus were introduced by Ross into the narrative version of the drama, the title of which was derived from Urseren, the alternative name of Andermatt.

Ross mentions also that at Andermatt he visited the old mortuary and was allowed by the Capuchin father to examine the skull of Johannes Murinus and also another skull "very broad at the orbits, sloping suddenly towards the vertex, every tooth perfect and the bones heavy and solid". A label with the inscription "Est Profecto Deus" and with the grotesque figure of an evil spirit suggested at once that this must have been the head of the Cardinal Bonto. It was four hundred years old and Ross was deeply moved when holding it in his hands.

The book remained unpublished for twenty-five years but eventually John Murray of London accepted it and it was printed in 1920. The reviews were fairly good, probably out of deference to the Nobel Laureate, but Ross felt that the critics had not understood the meaning of the book.

It is an odd book in which the feeling of beauty of the Bernese Oberland

and the romantic Walter Scott-ish theme are drowned in an extravagant welter of words that are a drag on the narrative and strike the modern reader as hyperbolic.

But once again, this is not the end of the story! The “Historical notes” referring to Johannes Murinus the biographer of Raffaello Bonto and to the Cardinal himself, the description of the life and deeds of Maximilian Count Reichenfels of Ulrichen, his political leanings towards Eidgenossenschaft and his cunning dealings with Ludovico Sforza and with the League of Italian States ring very true. However, most of it is an admirable spoof, a figment of Ross’s fertile imagination, impressive by its cleverness and panache.

The years 1894–1895, when Ross finished “The Revels of Orsera” and another novel “The Spirit of the Storm”, represented a critical period of his life. They marked the peak of the conflict between Ross the writer and Ross the scientist.

He saw clearly that the vicious circle of disease, poverty and ignorance was one of the main causes of misery in India and no single disease was more involved than malaria in its effects on sickness and mortality.

He wrote: “The painful faces ask; can we not cure?
We answer, No not yet; we seek the laws.
O God reveal through all this thing obscure,
The small unseen but million-murdering cause.”

It is perhaps significant that the next written work of Ross was an essay on malaria which received the Parkes Memorial Prize in 1895 and shows an acute analytical approach combined with an alert intuition. But the solution of the mystery of transmission of malaria did not come until August 20, 1897, and this was the real parting of the clouds, a true curtain raiser for one of the major discoveries of medical science.

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