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John David Bourchier: an Irish Journalist in the Balkans

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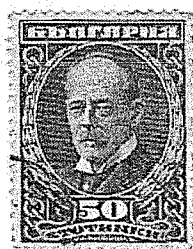
This article is based on initial research into the life of Bourchier carried out while the author worked on an EU journalism education project at the University of Sofia, Bulgaria.

Introduction

In 1920, the funeral took place at the Rila Monastery in Bulgaria's Rhodope Mountains of the journalist John David Bourchier (1850-1920) of Bruff, Baggotstown, Co Limerick, Ireland. One newspaper in Sofia led with the headline: 'Our Bourchier is dead.' When news of his death became known in Sofia, a crowd gathered outside the hotel where he had lived on and off for 30 years. His funeral service was in 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, from what is still referred to as the Turkish yoke. The Irish man's body lay in state in the cathedral, with his face uncovered in the Orthodox tradition. He had a huge funeral, and the crowds lined the route through the city as the cortege made its way to the mountains.

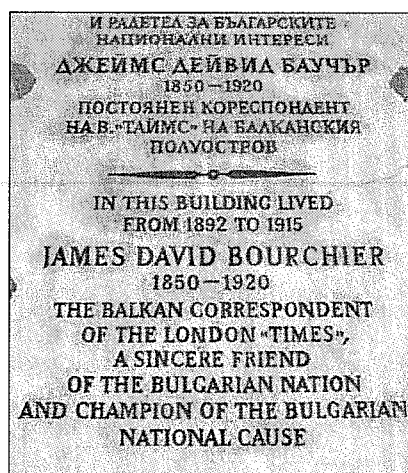
King Boris personally granted Bourchier's wish to be buried at Rila monastery. Rila is a mysterious place, situated in a high valley, surrounded by forests and high peaks that remain snow covered for much of the year. The fortified monastery is one of the most beautiful in Bulgaria, a country famous for its remote monasteries. It is also the centre of Bulgarian Orthodox spirituality. Bourchier 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, the clearing was much greater, and it would have been clearly visible from the road leading to the monastery gate.

One of Sofia's major roads is named Bourchier Boulevard. At what was the Grand Hotel Bulgarie, the only home he had in the Balkans, 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 Bourchier wearing the Bulgarian peasant dress he liked to wear.



From 1888, Bourchier 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 its cause internationally and insisted that Bulgaria and the Balkans had significance outside those deemed important by the great powers. Bourchier was at his post for 30 years, to the extent that he actually identified with the Bulgarian people and their national interests. At the same time, he maintained, it was still possible to be an impartial reporter while recognizing the rightness of a cause. In the 1990s, journalists covering wars in the Balkans would continue to struggle with the same 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 of Anglo-Irish stock.

Early life and career

Bourchier was born in 1850 into a family that could trace its roots back to the Anglo-Normans 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 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' (Grogan, 1932: 7). Nevertheless, he remained 10 years at Eton, despite his encroaching deafness which made teaching increasingly difficult. 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 (ibid).

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 (*The Times*, 1996).

Journalism offered an alternative that Bourchier 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. (Grogan, 1932: 7)

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 Bourchier 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 Romania, and then go to Bulgaria which was 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.

Bourchier travelled to Romania where, with journalistic luck, the uprising had grown in strength. He sent a few dispatches, and then went on to Bulgaria to cover Ferdinand's first tour of his 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.

Bourchier 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 Olympic Games in 1896.

Bulgaria before Bourchier

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 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 they were dismissed by the Turks. 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' (Crampton, 1997: 85).

It was, however, too much for Britain and Austro-Hungary who feared Bulgaria would become a major factor in Russian influence in the Balkans; it was Russian action, after all, which led to Bulgarian independence. They insisted that 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' (Crampton, 1997: 85). That was the state of play when Bourchier 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. His reports from the Balkans were read by politicians and the foreign office in London at a time when Britain was a major power and viewed events in the Balkans as important 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 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, Moberly Bell, informing him that owing to other changes among *Times* correspondents, 'you will accordingly be fully recognised as our correspondent there' (Sofia) (Grogan, 1932: 20).

Reporting Bulgaria

Bouchier was regularly accused of bias towards Bulgaria, especially by Greece, over his 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. Bouchier had been a good friend, despite what he described in the *Times* as Stambolov's 'decidedly Orientalist methods of government'. Bouchier wrote further: 'A heavy responsibility rests with those who refused Stambolov permission to leave the country, and who, detaining him here like a prisoner, neglected the measures necessary to ensure his safety' (*The Times*, 1895).

Outcry followed what was seen as an accusation against the government. Prince Ferdinand protested to the *Times*, eliciting a letter to Bouchier 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. (in Grogan, 1932: 46)

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 pigeon hole for many years, but it is well to be prepared for all emergencies'. (ibid)

Bouchier 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 12 weeks hard investigation, interviewing frightened Muslims, but in the end he proved that there had been terrible atrocities against them.

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 and the Bulgarians, to the extent that he was able to advise governments and senior officials. At the time of the formation of the Balkan league, prior to the first Balkan war, he even acted 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 through the city, with his Bulgarian servant, Ivan Gruev. 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, bellowing into Bouchier's ear trumpet as he briefed the correspondent.

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 that the country'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 whatever parts of Macedonia Serbia was willing to give up, following its success in the Second Balkan War in 1913. Bulgaria entered the war in 1915 on the Central Powers' side.

Following the war, Bulgaria lost nearly all the gains it had made by entering the war 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 who, 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' (quoted in Pandev et al., 1993: 10).

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 (Kaplan, 1994: 230). 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:

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. (Grogan, 1932: 186)

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.

Outsider in Britain, champion in the Balkans

Bourchier was born into an Anglo-Irish family 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. With the scarcity of biographical material, (there is one biography, and diaries that record little more than dates and appointments), it is not fanciful to suggest that Bourchier's support for and strong advocacy of Bulgarian independence and for the freedom of Macedonia and earlier, Crete, was influenced by his own experiences.

Bourchier 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. In fact the Irish journalist and parliamentarian, TP O'Connor, when asked to write an appreciation following Bourchier's death, remarks that he believed Bourchier was a fellow countryman, but he was not aware of that when they met. His biographer, Lady Grogan, suggests he had some stereotypical qualities such as gregariousness, which she ascribed to his being Irish. In his writings, with the exception of some early pieces he wrote while still at Eton, he never wrote nor made comparisons with Ireland. Nevertheless, 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 mind. (Corkery, 1924: 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 Russell was perceived by the English establishment:

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. (quoted in de Burgh, 2000: 34)

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 force 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 those of both 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 Lesley 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:

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. (Leslie, 1916: 47)¹

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 indicates 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, 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. (Grogan, 1932: 204)

After his death, there were many tributes to Bourchier. Former prime ministers of both Greece and Bulgaria described him as a friend of their respective countries. As late as 1983, the official Sofia Press published *The Times Correspondent Reporting from Sofia* (Pandev et al, 1983), a collection of Bourchier's articles, mainly used to argue for the incorporation of Macedonia into Bulgaria. According to the introduction (p.10), 'Bulgaria cherishes the sacred memory of James Bourchier'. 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' (ibid). In the end, this remarkable journalist, scion of the Anglo-Irish, was commemorated by kings, peasants, politicians and even the Communist authorities of Bulgaria.

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¹ I am grateful to Professor Tadhg Foley of NUI, Galway, for drawing this to my attention.
