Bourchier, James David

by James Quinn

Bourchier, James David (1850–1920), journalist and Balkan intermediary, was born 18 December 1850 at Baggotstown, Bruff, Co. Limerick, fourth son among six children of John Bourchier, landowner and JP of Baggotstown, and Sarah Bourchier (née Aher) of La Rive, Castlecomber, Co. Kilkenny. The Bourchiers were of huguenot origin. Educated at the Rev. John Leech’s preparatory school at Mitchelstown, Co. Cork, and at Portora Royal School, Enniskillen, he graduated BA from TCD in 1873 with a gold medal for classics, and won a scholarship at King’s College, Cambridge, where he came seventh in the first class of the classical tripos (1876). Around this time he began to go deaf due to a cold contracted after measles. In 1878 he became an assistant master at Eton, but his growing deafness affected his teaching and he reluctantly quit in 1887. Having engaged in some journalism – the Globe published some articles he had written on evictions in Ireland – he was offered in 1888 the post of Balkan correspondent of The Times. Operating mainly out of Athens and Sofia, he became an expert on Balkan politics and history and grew to love the region. He was, however, rather too sensitive and scrupulous to be really successful as a journalist, and was appalled at the hunger of newspapers for early rather than true news.

A staunch advocate of independence for nationalities under Turkish rule, and of a Balkan federation, he won by his honesty and disinterestedness the trust and affection of presidents and peasants alike. He was often entrusted with the role of intermediary by the region’s warring factions, his deafness generally proving more of an asset than a handicap in Balkan diplomacy. In 1895 he prepared a report for the British government on the massacre by the Turks at Dospat in Macedonia, and in 1896 received the thanks of the Cretan assembly for his part in negotiations with Turkey; he served as intermediary between Cretan insurgents and the Greek government, was unofficial adviser to Prince George when he served as high commissioner of Crete in 1898, and publicised the plight of the Bulgarian peasants of Macedonia when they rose against the Turks in 1903. He had a particular sympathy for Bulgaria, loved its land and people, and studied its birds, flowers, and antiquities; he was often chided by his editor for being excessively pro-Bulgarian. In 1911–12 he played a major part in the negotiations that led to the formation of the Balkan League, particularly in the rapprochement between Greece and Bulgaria, which he hoped might lead to the union of Balkan states he so fervently desired. In 1914–15 he did all in his power to encourage Bulgaria and Rumania to support the Entente, and was desperately disappointed by Bulgaria’s decision to join the Central Powers (October 1915). Afterwards he had to leave Sofia, travelling to Rumania, Odessa, and Petrograd, before returning to Ireland in 1918 and residing at La Rive, Castlecomber, Co. Kilkenny, which he had inherited from his mother’s sister. He wrote to the Bulgarian people: ‘though you have chosen the wrong side in
the war, I do not forget your cause is just and when peace comes, I shall defend the legitimate rights of the Bulgarian nation’ (Butler, 155). In 1918 he retired from The Times and devoted himself to securing a just post-war settlement in the Balkans, but was greatly disappointed by what he saw as the vindictive treatment of Bulgaria enshrined in the treaty of Neuilly (1919). He was honoured by Montenegro, Greece, Rumania, and Bulgaria for his diplomatic efforts.

A popular figure, he had a wide circle of friends, among whom he made little secret of his homosexuality. Despite his deafness, he was a charming conversationalist, a linguist, and a musician. A fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, he spent much time exploring the Balkans’ Hellenic past. He wrote on archaeology and travel as well as politics, contributing frequently to the Fortnightly, Quarterly, Contemporary, and other reviews, and wrote several articles on the Balkans for the Encyclopaedia Britannica (11th ed.). He died at Sofia 30 December 1920 and was buried at Rilo monastery, where he had often worked and rested. The Bulgarian government declared a day of national mourning on his death, one of the main streets in Sofia was named after him, and he was the subject of three Bulgarian postage stamps. His The Bulgarian peace treaty was published in 1921.

Burke, LGI (1912), 63; J. R. L. Rankin, The inner history of the Balkan war (1914), 1–21; IBL, v (1914), 215; xii (1921), 116–17; xiii (1922), 136; Times, 1 Jan. 1921; Lady Ellinore Grogan, The life of James David Bourchier (1926); DNB; WWW; Hubert Butler, ‘James Bouchier: an Irishman in Bulgaria’, id., Grandmother and Wolfe Tone (1990), 151–7