

An Introduction to Sir Ernest Gowers

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Summary: In this essay, Rebecca Gowers offers a brief biography and bibliography of Sir Ernest Gowers, author of the report *Houses of Outstanding Historic or Architectural Interest*, known as the Gowers Report. Gowers led an interesting and varied life that saw him work at the top level of Government. The Gowers Report concluded that private ownership is the most valuable tool in insuring the survival of historic houses for future generations.

At the start of his 1950 report on *Houses of Outstanding Historic or Architectural Interest*, Sir Ernest Gowers wrote:

"We have no doubt that fine architecture and craftsmanship, placed in settings of outstanding beauty and rich with historic interest, make their appeal far beyond the limited circle of experts; and especially perhaps to those in whose daily life beauty can normally play but little part."

This has a distinctly patrician air, (who defines beauty?), an air that is rather reinforced when one considers Gowers's titles at the time: Chevalier of the Order of the Crown of Belgium; Knight Grand Cross of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire; Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath. Within two years he would be awarded yet another title, the curious-sounding "Gentleman Usher of the Purple Rod".

But all this loftiness is in its way misleading. Ernest's patrilineal grandfather had been a Hackney boot maker whose own parents were a gentleman's butler and a laundrywoman. It had been Ernest's father, born in 1845, who brought about the radical jump in class. William Gowers, exercising Dickensian levels of determination, and with more than a dash of natural aptitude, managed to leave behind a boyhood world of boots, gunsmiths and gelatine factories to become not merely a doctor, but one of the founding fathers of neurology. Indeed, part of the human anatomy was known to Victorian specialists as the "Gowers bundle", a literal bundle of nerves. At 42, William Gowers was elected a fellow of the Royal Society. In his 50s he gained a knighthood of his own. He was friends with Rudyard Kipling. He became a member of the Athenaeum, et cetera. Not that he ever felt a need to conceal his origins, so it was said. In 1875 he married Mary Baines, whose nonconformist family owned the Leeds Mercury, and together they had four children, of whom Ernest, born in 1880, was the third.

Ernest was sent to Rugby, read Classics at Cambridge, and passed the bar. But he then switched tack, and in 1903 passed the Civil Service Exam. Thereafter, he rose swiftly through the ranks, and was soon appointed Principal Private Secretary to Lloyd George, then the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Gowers later disclosed privately that one of the skills this required of him was an ability to forge Lloyd George's signature on urgent documents, not least when the man himself was off philandering. More seriously, when in 1911, in the teeth of virulent opposition, Lloyd George managed to bring in a National Insurance Act, a foundation stone of the welfare state, Gowers became one of a crack team of young civil servants given the immense task of implementing an entire system of health and unemployment insurance in six months flat. As a civil servant Gowers did what he was asked to do. But a task of this nature would also appear to have suited his private leanings. In his surviving archive, a kindly democratising instinct often glimmers through, on top of which, it seems reasonable to venture that his own background had left him alert to weighted interplay between social advantage and raw merit, an imbalance he was very ready to try to help to correct.

With the outbreak of the First World War, the National Insurance Commission became a front for a highly clandestine propaganda unit known as "Wellington House", partly funded by the Secret Service. Gowers quickly became its invisible Chief Executive Officer, in which role he helped to wrangle numerous authors into producing supposedly spontaneous works sympathetic to the government point of view. Among these authors were, as it happens, Kipling again, H.G. Wells, J.M. Barrie, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, John Buchan, Arnold Bennett, G.K. Chesterton, John Galsworthy and Thomas Hardy, to name a few. Within just nine months, Wellington House had two and a half million copies of various works in circulation, at home and abroad, in numerous different languages.

In 1919, Gowers began what would prove to be a long and complicated working relationship with coal: eventually, in 1946, he would recommend, and help to bring in, nationalisation, in the face of what he called the "centrifugal" self-interest of private colliery owners. In the aftermath of the General Strike of 1926, he also had a spell as Chairman of the Board of Inland Revenue. Notably, too, with the coming of the Second World War, Gowers was almost at once appointed Senior Regional Commissioner for London. This meant that for almost the duration, and for the worst of the Blitz, he faced the monumental task of helping to mastermind the civil defence of the capital, its near surroundings, and roughly 7 million people. For this work, he was based in a bunker beneath the Geological Survey Office at the Natural History Museum, where he was supplied with three telephone lines that ran out in different directions in hopes that they would never all be bombed at once. Plans were laid for the government to remove from town should this become necessary, on which Churchill wrote to

Gowers: "If communication with the Government becomes very difficult or impossible, it may be necessary for you to act on behalf of the Government ... without consultation." He explained that in these circumstances, Gowers could take any emergency measures he thought necessary. "Such action, duly recorded, will be supported by the Government," Churchill wrote, "and the Government will ask Parliament to give you whatever indemnification may subsequently be found necessary." Gowers found this picture of unbridled power so unappealing that he joked that if it ever came to it, he would expect to end up dangling from a lamp post, and he later dismissed the unprecedented and distressing role that he actually did play by saying that he had in truth been, "but a transient and embarrassed phantom flitting across the stage of history".

After the Second World War, and having nominally retired, Gowers began on a phase of his career where he chaired multiple committees and enquiries and even a Royal Commission, many of these tasks overlapping. The work of research into historic houses actually began in 1948, and must have provided a stark contrast with another endeavour already consuming him, aimed at countering post-war homelessness, an unhappy three-year stretch he spent as Chairman of the Harlow New Town Development Corporation. As it happens, he was also offered a role in the reconstruction of Germany, but this was more than he could face, and he turned it down. He did though, in 1949, take up yet another role, when he began chairing a Royal Commission into Capital Punishment. Its strict remit was to give recommendations on limiting the number of crimes to which the death penalty should attach, but Gowers and his fellow commissioners ultimately breached these terms to propose that capital punishment should be abolished altogether. By the time they revealed this unasked-for conclusion, Churchill was Prime Minister once more, and he very much disapproved. A letter has sat for decades tucked into a Gowers family copy of the Commission's report in which Churchill offers amusingly mealy-mouthed thanks, or really non-thanks, for this public service rendered. Viewed as a battle of wills, this was of course one that Churchill was destined to lose.

In these post-war years, Gowers was also hard at it producing the work for which he would be best remembered. In 1946, the Treasury invited him to concoct a training manual for civil servants on the art of writing cogent and understandable English, something civil servants at the time were inclined not to do. The resulting slim volume, *Plain Words*, found favour with the high-ups, and His Majesty's Stationery Office decided to publish it as a book for

general sale. Gowers found himself being offered a flat fee of £500, normal in the circumstances and even generous by Treasury standards. But he demurred, and instead made the unheard-of request to be paid a royalty. Cue consternation at the Treasury: irritated letters were circulated with acid remarks pencilled in their margins. When Gowers finally won the day, a negotiator on the other side wrote to him and said: "Like you, I hate arguments about money—although I must admit you do it frightfully well." *Plain Words* was first published commercially in April 1948. By the end of 1949 it had sold 200,000 copies. Its most widely quoted maxim was, and is: "Be short, be simple, be human." And in one form or another, it has never gone out of print. *Plain Words* can be understood as another match for Gowers's democratising instincts. At an original price of two shillings, it offered countless thousands a route towards wielding the advantages of clear formal English, treating the English language as a common inheritance of us all.

In a subsequent expanded version of the book, Gowers threw in an analogy that it is tempting to think might have struck him as a result of his recent work on the 1950 Historic Houses report. Writing about ill-formed and cliché-ridden sentences, he said: "It is as though the builder ... collected chunks of masonry from ruined houses built by others and stuck them together anyhow." This returns us to the opening of the 1950 report, and Gowers's assertion that one good reason to preserve outstanding houses and their settings was the hope of benefiting those "in whose daily life beauty can normally play but little part". Later in its pages, as a trade-off for various forms of aid, the report again endorses what is often now labelled "widening access": "we think that if financial help is given, whether by special tax relief or by grant or loan, it should normally be one of the conditions that the house is shown to the public". In another passing comment, on the merits or otherwise of turning historic houses into schools, and after noting the value of such surroundings to various types of pupil, the report offers its own caveat by saying that if such an approach should make outstanding buildings unavailable to public visitors, "this great gain of the few may be at the cost of some loss by the many".

A bent towards cultural gain for "the many" may seem unexceptional to us now, but it is the hope of this short piece to suggest that in Gowers's Historic Houses report this particular note had more to it than mere political expediency, echoing as it does his own democratising instincts, perhaps partly rooted in his family past.

Then again, there was a member of his committee whose extreme leftwards tilt would presumably have shocked Gowers had he known about it: dying in 1966, he never found out the truth about Anthony Blunt, who had featured as the committee's representative art historian. Gowers did, however, leave an indicator of his attitude towards Blunt's fellow spies, whose betrayals were exposed much sooner, in 1951. Shortly afterwards, he bought a couple of black sheep to keep down the grass in a pasture by his home and named them Burgess and Maclean.

The recommendations of the Historic Houses report were not immediately taken up, but they would come to underpin later legislation. When representatives of "the many" now wander round the country's great houses, they must know vanishingly little of all this, and it seems highly improbable that Gowers would have wanted it any other way. Yet it is still also possible to picture that he might have been quietly pleased if he could have known that, 75 years on, today's "limited circle of experts" would be celebrating one of his other "phantom flits", and more particularly its effect of helping to preserve the common culture of us all.

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