

W. Somerset Maugham

By Forrest D. Bunt

Texas A & M University

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Twayne Publishers • Boston

*for my wife, Veva;
my children, Cheree, Kevin, and Gingerlynn;
and my special friend, Milt*

W. Somerset Maugham

Forrest D. Burt

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About the Author

Forrest D. Burt is professor of English at Texas A&M University, where he has been a faculty member since 1967. He received his B.A. from Wayland Baptist University in 1962 and his M.A. in 1965 and the Ph.D. in 1967 from Texas Tech University. His articles and reviews, primarily in Victorian and Edwardian literature and psychology and literature, have appeared in the *Journal of Modern Literature*, *Journal of Individual Psychology*, the *Bulletin of Bibliography*, and *Literature and Psychology*. His books, mainly in rhetoric and evaluation of writing, have been published by Random House and the National Council of Teachers of English.

Preface

This work aims to serve as an introduction to the study of English literature and to the understanding of the writings of William Somerset Maugham. Although the focus is upon his literary works, the initial chapters deal with his life. Furthermore, throughout this study reference will be made to Maugham's life, his times, and other writers whenever such reference sheds light on the writings.

Critical study of this long-neglected writer has become more serious in the years following his death. In addition to the usual personal reminiscences, in the form of articles and books, that appear after the death of any popular writer, several scholarly and critically sound books have appeared. Raymond Toole Stott's last bibliography (1973), Charles Sanders's annotated bibliography of writings about Maugham, and Ted Morgan's biography are among these. In addition, several critical books—especially those by Calder, Curtis, Raphael, Dobrinsky, and Cordell—have strengthened this new serious consideration of Maugham.

The texts of the works are in exceptional order. The collected editions were nearly complete in Maugham's lifetime (see the bibliography below); and the recent reprint series of his original works published by Arno Press provides the basis for future studies.

I wish to acknowledge my debt to the many individuals who assisted me in this project. The library staffs at the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Stanford University, Yale University, the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, and Herbert J. Frost/W. Somerset Maugham Collection at Texas A & M University were all very helpful and deserve sincere thanks. Colleagues who have helped me include Stanley L. Archer, Jeanne Austin, Richard Hauer Costa, and Milton and Clara Huggett of Texas A & M University. Klaus Jonas of the University of Pittsburgh gave me honest advice. Richard A. Cordell of Purdue University, the leading American critic of Maugham since the thirties, helped and encouraged me in more ways than I could ever name. Joseph Dobrinsky of Montpellier University, the leading critic of Maugham in France today, took time to talk with me about our common interests in Maugham and shared his own work and ideas

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Forrest D. Burt

Texas A & M University

Chronology

- 1874 William Somerset Maugham born at the British Embassy in Paris on 25 January, the fourth son of English parents.
- 1882 Mother dies of tuberculosis.
- 1884 Father dies of cancer.
- 1887 Enters King's School, Canterbury.
- 1891 Spends one year and several months in Germany.
- 1892–1897 Attends medical school at St. Thomas's Hospital in London; receives an M.D. degree.
- 1897 *Liza of Lambeth*, a naturalistic novel based largely on his medical experience in Lambeth.
- 1898 *The Making of a Saint*, a historical novel.
- 1899 *Orientations: Short Stories*.
- 1902 *Mrs. Craddock: A Novel*.
- 1905 *The Land of the Blessed Virgin: Sketches and Impressions in Andalusia*, a travel book.
- 1906 Begins love affair with Sue Jones.
- 1907 *Lady Frederick*, his first successful play, begins a performance run of over a year at the Royal Court Theatre in London.
- 1913 Sue Jones rejects Maugham's proposal of marriage.
- 1914–1915 Serves with a British ambulance unit and with military intelligence in Geneva.
- 1915 *Of Human Bondage*, autobiographical fiction.
- 1916 Visits South Sea islands; gathers material on Paul Gauguin for *The Moon and Sixpence*.
- 1917 Serves as the chief agent in Russia for the British and American secret services in an attempt to prevent the Bolshevik coup of 1917. Contracts tuberculosis and spends time in a sanatorium. Marries Syrie Wellcome.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

- 1919 *The Moon and Sixpence*, based on the life of Paul Gauguin.
- 1921 *The Circle*, a comedy of manners, begins a run of 181 performances at the Haymarket Theatre in London.
- 1928 *Ashenden*, short stories based upon Maugham's secret service experiences.
- 1929 Syrie Wellcome divorces Maugham.
- 1930 *Cakes and Ale*, a novel in the comic tradition.
- 1938 *The Summing Up*, an autobiographical sketch of his life and work. Visits India.
- 1940–1946 Spends war years in the United States.
- 1944 *The Razor's Edge*, a novel drawing from his visit to India.
- 1946 Donates the *Of Human Bondage* manuscript and the earlier unpublished version of this work, "*The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey*," to the Library of Congress.
- 1962 *Purely For My Pleasure*, description of his art collection with an account of how each piece was acquired. "Looking Back" (in *Show*), an autobiographical sketch of parts of his life.
- 1965 Maugham dies at his Villa Mauresque on 16 December at the age of ninety-one.

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Chapter One

Life and Background

Childhood in Paris

On 25 January 1874 William Somerset Maugham was born in the British Embassy in Paris—thereby ensuring his citizenship in the British Empire, then under the reign of Queen Victoria. His father, Robert Ormond Maugham, an English lawyer in the Paris firm of Maugham and Sewall, was serving at the time as a legal attaché to the British Embassy. He was fifty years old and William was his eighth child. Maugham's mother, Edith Mary Snell Maugham, the daughter of an English army officer and of a mother who wrote French novels and light music, was much admired by prominent Parisians for her beauty and charm. She was only twenty-nine years old. William was the fourth of her living children, all sons.

Maugham's father traveled extensively and owned a large library of travel books. His own father had been an eminent barrister and author, had established the Incorporated Law Society, and had founded and edited the *Legal Observer*, later the *Solicitor's Journal* (accomplishments that entitled him to be called the "Father of Legal Journalism").¹ For some reason, unknown even to his own son, Maugham's father moved to Paris. Perhaps, Maugham once speculated, his father was drawn by the same "restlessness for the unknown as had consumed his son" (*SU*, 15). A "connoisseur in art as well as law,"² he was considered not attractive—"ugly," according to Maugham. He did enjoy an active social life—for which his attractive young wife was an asset. As Maugham reports, "they were known in the Paris of the day as Beauty and the Beast" (*SU*, 16).

Famous for her beauty and charm, Edith Mary Snell Maugham was known also for her salon where writers, artists, and politicians could meet.³ According to Maugham's brother Frederic—eight years his senior—"it is hardly an exaggeration to say that she knew almost everyone worth knowing in Paris."⁴ Her interest in art and literature was genuine; she was a "great novel reader" with cases full of books (*SU*, 17). And, according to Frederic, on rainy days they "generally

went to the Louvre or to the Luxembourg.” A child of English parents, she had been born in India where her father served as a major in the army. Her father was killed in battle shortly after she was born. Like her sons, she spoke two languages as a child—“Hindustani much better than English.” She was sent at a very early age to school in England. When she and Robert met, she and her mother were living in Paris on her father’s pension. Maugham’s brother remembers her in this way: “In my mind’s eye the gracious figure of my mother, who was a very beautiful woman, is still to be seen moving about and speaking pleasant words to her boys and watching over our happiness.”⁵ Maugham, as Frederic Raphael states, “never ceased to adore her.”⁶

The Maughams, therefore, led an active and busy life in Paris. Maugham’s father left early in the morning and did not return until around seven, and generally worked on Saturdays as well. But there was time for laughter in the Maugham’s lives. Frederic recalls: “In my youth I often heard, both from my parents and others, of the gaiety, the *joie de vivre* and the genial spirit of the French in the days of the Empire, which made Paris the most attractive place of residence in all Europe. A large number of English people had apartments in Paris and were welcomed as friends of the French people. There was a lot of entertaining and much innocent enjoyment. . . .”⁷ And the Maughams were evidently happily married. One of Mrs. Maugham’s friends, Lady Anglesey, an American, once told William that she had one day asked her: “You’re so beautiful and there are so many people in love with you, why are you faithful to that ugly little man you’ve married?” She replied, “He never hurts my feelings” (SU, 16). And Frederic remembers the wonderful days of their vacations when, although his father could not go with them because of his work, he would join them later. On one occasion, he recalls, his father arrived “with a machine, afterwards to be known as a bone-shaker, on which we all learnt a surprisingly rapid means of motion. . . . It had iron tyres and practically no spring under the saddle, but the riders of that day . . . did not complain.” And if “it was warm in Paris and we were still there we used to bathe very frequently in the Seine in one of the wooden floating bath structures made for the purpose.”⁸

The world that Maugham was born into, however, had begun a major alteration from that which Frederic had known. Four years before Maugham’s birth, France was at war, Paris was under siege, and

the Maughams were forced to leave for England until it was safe to return. Maugham's father's "life was greatly affected by the war of 1870; for his practice was ruined and had to be built up again in a Paris to which many of his old clients never returned."⁹ Having to work long hours—leaving early and returning late—he made no great impact on Maugham's life. No wonder Maugham would write: "My father was a stranger to me."¹⁰ When Maugham was born in 1874, both his parents were in bad health. His mother suffered from tuberculosis. She was often ill, and always failing. Maugham "shared a room with his French nurse, but often was able to spend a little time alone with his mother in her bedroom in the mornings and was welcome in the salon. . . ." Soon his older brothers were off to school at Dover in England. They returned on the three holiday periods, of course. But otherwise, the young Maugham had the Paris world all to himself. It is not surprising, then, that he had "the illusion of being an only child." Frederic Raphael describes Maugham's life at that time as "a life of cosseted indulgence with two parents who cared much for each other."¹¹ Still at age sixty-four Maugham wrote that he knew "Little of them [his parents] but from hearsay" (*SU*, 15). As business worsened and bad health took its toll and life altered, it was no doubt his French nurse who became more and more his constant companion and who gave the small boy constant love.

Death of Parents and Move to England

Life altered quite suddenly. The only remedy for his mother's condition, the doctors maintained, was another pregnancy. In 1892, the child was born dead and Mrs. Maugham died six days later. Maugham then had only his nurse, and his father—who was a stranger to him.

Two years later life altered once more—in three telling events. First, his father, whose health declined steadily as he struggled to maintain his business, kept up the building of a vacation house he had begun earlier, and grieved over the loss of his wife, died of cancer and overwork. The money he left was barely enough to educate his four sons. Maugham was ten years old.

Of course, Maugham's brothers felt the loss deeply also. Frederic called it tragic—the deaths of their mother in 1882 and their father in 1884—"tragic for young boys and greatly altering their lives." "It was the end of a home. My brothers and I were soon separated by force of events, and therefore we did not see much of each other."¹²

But Maugham was the youngest. His life would be more severely altered.

The second event, a consequence of the first, was that Maugham—now an orphan—accompanied by his French nurse, was soon shipped to England, his native land, whose language he could hardly speak. This change would cut a deep groove in Maugham's memory. As Raphael observes, "The French influence on his character and style can scarcely be overemphasized. French locutions always haunted his prose and French literature was to be closer to his heart than . . . English. . . ." ¹³ The boys' guardians were a London solicitor, Albert Dixon—"a kindly man who did his best" for them—and their uncle, their father's only surviving brother, Henry Macdonald Maugham, vicar of Whitstable, married but with no children. It was to the vicar's home that Maugham went. There could not have been a household any more unsuitable for the ten-year-old French-speaking Maugham. Frederic states: "I am afraid he [their uncle] was very narrow-minded and a far from intelligent cleric, and I cannot truthfully praise him as a guardian of boys." ¹⁴ In the home of his uncle and aunt, Maugham "found himself a stranger in a strange land, at the chilly mercy of a cowed *Hausfrau* and her snobbish, joyless husband, a childless couple no happier to see him than he was to see them." ¹⁵

Perhaps the most tragic event of all, though, was his uncle's announcement that his nurse, the only other survivor from the lost Parisian paradise of his childhood, was to be sent away the next day. He had shared a room with her. She had been the one constant companion through the last several years of his childhood. She was all that was left of his home. In his old age, in "Looking Back"—published when he was eighty-eight years old—Maugham spoke of this loss. He wrote in his usual unsentimental manner, and in such a modest and simple fashion that a reader could easily miss the force of his grief. He first states: "My father died years later [after his mother] and I was taken by my nurse to England to be delivered over to my uncle and guardian who was Vicar of Whitstable." There can be little doubt that Maugham's use of passive construction here is deliberate. Then, following this statement, is the poignant sentence: "I loved my nurse and shed bitter tears when she was there and then sent away" (L, 64). It was a loss from which he would never recover. And even here in these early years, Maugham learned the power of money—which he would call the sixth sense without which one can not enjoy the other five: his uncle stopped payment and the nurse he loved was

gone. He would never again surrender himself as completely, take such risks, be hurt so deeply.

In the early, unpublished, autobiographical novel, "The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey," his uncle tells him that his mother was always throwing money away, that after debts were paid little money was left, and that it is almost a blessing that she died. But even the nurse herself in this early version of *Of Human Bondage* is mainly concerned with the position she is losing, whether she will get a whole month's notice, and who will get Mrs. Carey's clothes. In *The Summing Up*, Maugham writes of his losses: "When I was a small boy and unhappy I used to dream night after night that my life at school was a dream and that I should wake to find myself at home again with my mother." The alterations to his life were permanent:

I have long ceased to have that dream; but I have never quite lost the sense that my living life was a mirage in which I did this and that because that was how it fell out, but which, even while I was playing my part in it, I could look at from a distance and know it for the mirage it was. When I look back on my life, with its successes and its failures, its endless errors, its deceptions and its fulfilments, its joys and miseries, it seems to me strangely lacking in reality. It is shadowy and unsubstantial. (*SU*, 304)

And yet Maugham found that he did have some control over his life and the reactions of others, that there was some freedom in bondage. Philip, in the autobiographical *Of Human Bondage* (1915) (and Stephen, in the earlier version of that novel) discovers pleasure in pain, a kind of pleasurable sensation in seeing others feel pity for the sufferer. Ted Morgan suggests that Maugham's experiences at the vicarage established a crucial link between love and suffering: "The death of his mother had forged it, and it would appear not only in his work but in all of his important relationships."¹⁶

Development of a Stammer

Another consequence of Maugham's loss of home and the move to England was his developing a speech impediment, a stammer, which he did not have in France and which he would have, although later improved, throughout his long life. It began when he came to England at the age of ten.¹⁷ It may well have been, as Morgan suggests, "an expression of juvenile insecurity of his first stumbling efforts in a new environment . . . the expression of a conflict between giving

himself and holding back."¹⁸ Or it may have been, as Anthony Curtis suggests, "the outward and audible sign" of his alienation.¹⁹ But if stammering is "a manifestation of a fear to speak the truth to oneself or about oneself to another,"²⁰ then it may be that in his hesitancy and frustration, Maugham knew, as did the novelist Edward Driffeld in *Cakes and Ale*, that truth was not always well received. He would have to become a writer to tell the truth with the simplicity and spontaneity that he so strongly believed should characterize all communication—but which he was never able to master in his own oral communication. In his writing he found that peace and fluency to such an extent that when he was almost ninety years old he could say: "I have never been so happy or so much at ease as when, seated at my table, from my pen flowed word after word until the luncheon gong forced me to put an end to the day's work" (*L*, 62). Maugham was himself aware of the specific relationship between difficulty in speaking and a need to write. In his preface to Arnold Bennett's novel *The Old Wives' Tale*, he said of Bennett, a fellow stammerer: "It may be that except for the stammer which forced him to introspection, Arnold would never have become a writer."²¹

Interesting at this point are the findings of speech research that stammers tend to be found "most frequently in those families that place a high premium upon the truth and then punish its verbalization."²² This description could quite well fit the home Maugham's uncle dominated. And it was in his new home in England that Maugham began to stammer.²³

Educated at London University and Oriel College, Oxford, the Reverend Macdonald Maugham, Maugham's only living uncle on his father's side of the family, had been vicar of Whitstable for thirteen years when William arrived in 1884. In 1858, some twenty-six years before this arrival date, he had married Barbara Sophia von Scheidlen, the daughter of a German banker. They had no children. As would be expected, the Maughams were prominent citizens in this class-conscious sea resort and fishing village. They employed two maids—as well as other servants, traded at the "right" shops, and lived just the life proper for a vicar and his wife.

Maugham has written five accounts of his experiences in Whitstable: Stephen Carey's in "The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey" (ca. 1898), Philip Carey's in *Of Human Bondage* (1915), Willie Ashenden's in *Cakes and Ale* (1930), and Maugham's own in *The Summing Up* (1938) and "Looking Back" (1962). Although similar to the first

two, the account in the last work is not fictionalized and captures the atmosphere of the vicar's home with the directness and poignancy necessary for one to understand the conditions in which his stammer developed:

On my first Sunday in England I accompanied my uncle and his wife, my aunt, to church for the morning service. . . . When the service was at last at an end we drove back to the vicarage and had dinner. After the table was cleared and I was deposited on a chair at one end of it and my uncle, with a prayer book open at the proper place, put it in front of me and told me to learn the collect of the day by heart. "I'll hear you say it at teatime," he said, "and if you say it properly you shall have a piece of cake." Then he went into his study to rest after the morning's exertions and my aunt went to lie down in the drawing room. I was left alone. An hour or so later my aunt went into the garden to have a stroll and as she passed the dining room windows, peeped in to see how I was getting on. My face was buried in my hands and I was crying, crying bitterly. She hurried into the dining room and asked me what was the matter. Crying all the more, I sobbed, "I can't understand it. All those words, I don't know what they mean." "Oh, Willie," she said, "your uncle wouldn't want you to cry. It was for your own good that he wanted you to learn the collect. Don't cry." She took the prayer book away from me and I was left alone once more to sob my heart out. When the table was set for tea my uncle did not speak to me. I could see that he was very cross. (*L*, 64)

With this strange new home and with his stammer, it is understandable that Maugham would believe so strongly in the importance of clarity in communication.

In this setting, then, Maugham began to sense his separateness from others and began to be more an observer than a participant. Even on shopping days, "as he tagged along in the wake of his aunt, Willie registered indelible impressions of these people. One of the most memorable was Gilbert Saunders, the bank manager of Hammond and Co.'s bank, and his uncle's church warden. . . . Sophie was in the habit of concluding her shopping by a gossip with his sister. . . ." They would typically "resume shopping and then perhaps go down one of the sidestreets, where fishermen were mending their nets, to gaze for a moment or two at the sea before returning to the Vicarage."²⁴ Perhaps the deepest impression upon him, though, was made by the class structure evident at every turn, those who were the "right" people, and those who were not. Even Mary Ann, his aunt and uncle's maid in *Cakes and Ale* (and in *Of Human Bondage*), adheres

rigidly to this system. Speaking of Willie's reprimand for riding his bicycle with the Driffields, not the "right" people, she says, "I don't blame your uncle . . . I wouldn't let you go about with them, not if you was my nephew. Fancy their asking you to ride your bicycle with them. Some people will do anything."²⁵

No doubt Maugham's interpretation of this life would have been different if his background had not been what it was. Life then could possibly have been as Morgan suggests: "it cannot have been such a bad life. He was living in a seaside resort, the ward of a local dignitary. The air was clean and the food was good. He did not have to compete with other children for the affection of his aunt and uncle."²⁶ But a sense of home, of love, a fluency in speaking—these he did not have. Therefore he was, as Morgan adds, "quite miserable."

Understandably, he became an avid reader and lived actively in an imaginary world. He would "feast his eyes upon pictures of mosques and minarets, palaces and terraces, pillars and grottoes as he pursued the memoirs of travellers in the East. His greatest find was the . . . *Thousand and One Arabian Nights* which he devoured; then there was Scott's *Waverley Novels* to be got through, Lewis Carroll. . . ."²⁷ So, when it was arranged that he, still but ten years old, should go to preparatory school, he had read "most of the *Waverley novels*, W. W. Lane's '*Arabian Nights*,' '*Alice in Wonderland*,' and '*Through the looking glass*' " (L, 64).

The Experience of School

That was his preparation for English schools. He had read, had observed his fellow human beings, had curiosity and imagination, had a command of two languages. But he had never held a bat or kicked a football. Little did he know what to expect that first day when he arrived with his uncle, fearful and knowing he would stammer, to meet the headmaster of King's School, Canterbury. As they waited in the parlor for the headmaster to come out and take charge of him, he said, "Tell him I stammer, Uncle." Looking back on that moment in his old age he wrote: "I little knew then how great an influence on my life this impediment of mine would have" (L, 64).

But the headmaster, the Reverend George Blore, "did nothing to reassure his tongue-tied new pupil."²⁸ For, in addition to encountering the "practical cruelty of the English schoolboy,"²⁹ Maugham would have to "suffer the verbal whips and scorns of the teaching staff." "There is no evidence that Maugham was ever caned, although