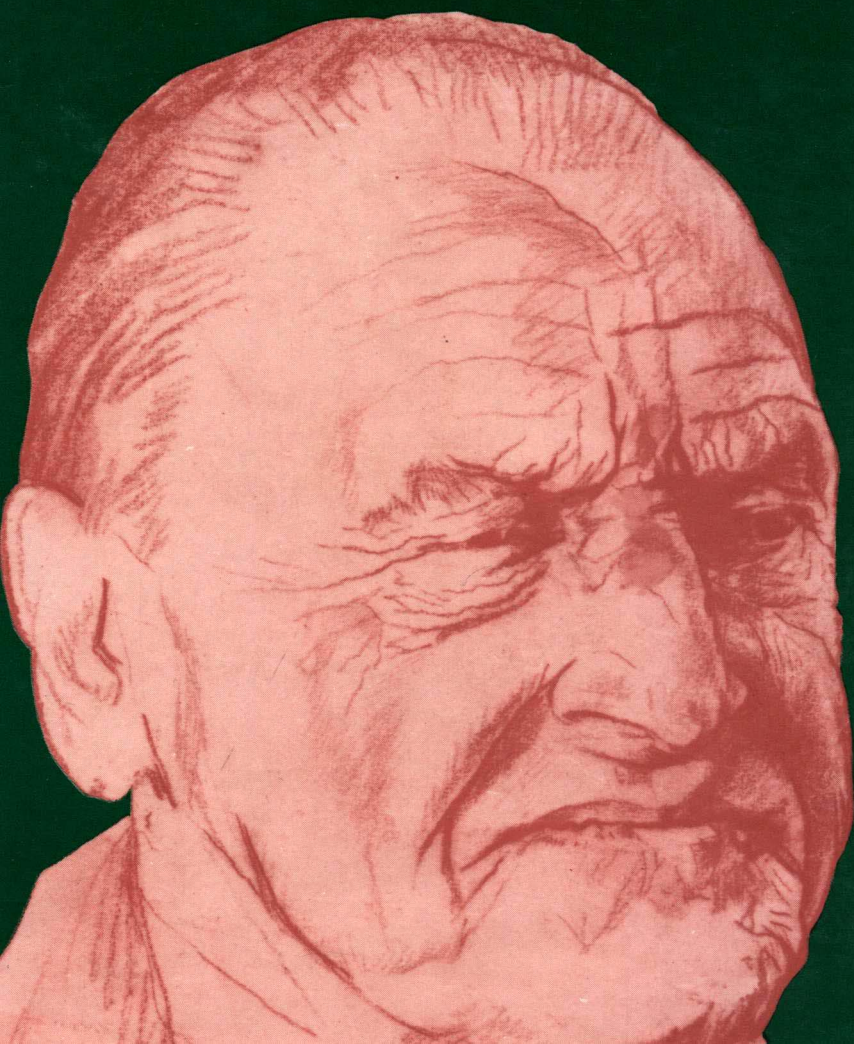


W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

Edited by Anthony Curtis
and John Whitehead

The Critical Heritage Series



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Edited by
ANTHONY CURTIS
and
JOHN WHITEHEAD

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General Editor's Preface

The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

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Introduction

I

'I have no illusions about my literary position,' Maugham wrote in *The Summing Up* (1938), referring to his non-dramatic work. 'There are but two important critics in my own country who have troubled to take me seriously and when clever young men write essays about contemporary fiction they never think of considering me. I do not resent it. It is very natural.' But he did resent it, and what he wrote was true: clever people like Virginia Woolf and her friends had long ago reached the conclusion that there was not much to be said about Maugham. 'Class Two, Division One' was Lytton Strachey's laconic dismissal of his work. One of the two 'important critics' referred to above was Desmond MacCarthy, who did take Maugham's work seriously, especially the plays and short stories which he rated highly, tracing their roots in French naturalism. The other 'important critic' may have been Raymond Mortimer, who had written thoughtful reviews of his books in the *New Statesman and Nation*. And in this same year 1938 the cleverest young man on the critical scene, Cyril Connolly—he was thirty-five and that, after all, is still young for a critic—brought out his autobiographical-cum-critical book *Enemies of Promise*, in which, in the chapters devoted to the modern movement in literature and the development of modern English prose style, there are frequent references to Maugham. He is praised for his 'lucidity' and described as 'the last of the great professional writers'. This may have mollified Maugham's resentment but cannot entirely have eliminated it.

The fact remains that full-scale essays in the English language on Maugham's work in this pre-World War II period are hard to find, though a glance across the Channel will light upon some, notably the work of the French critic Paul Dottin, whose first essay '*Le réalisme de Somerset Maugham*' à propos the French translation of *The Painted Veil* appeared in *La Revue de France* for June 1926 and later became part of the same critic's book-length study, *Somerset*

I