

Mary Lago

# *E. M. Forster*

*A Literary Life*



*General Editor: Richard Dutton*

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## E. M. FORSTER

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# E. M. Forster

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## A Literary Life

Mary Lago

*Emerita Professor*

*University of Missouri-Columbia*

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MACMILLAN

To P. N. Furbank

# Preface

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A sequence of literary genres suggests one key to the shape of E. M. Forster's working life. A specific form made him known to the public in a certain period, after which he laid it aside. His short fiction is the variation in this pattern. It was his first published work of consequence, and one of his last concerns was for a group of short stories that pleased but also grieved him, for he knew that, like the novel *Maurice*, they could not be published in any future that he could foresee. I have considered these works as in a way an epilogue, for their posthumous appearance made them an epilogue to his publishing history.

The novel is the form most readily associated with Forster's name. During five of the Edwardian years, from 1905 to 1910, he wrote four novels about dwellers in the rural suburbs of the Home Counties, of whom he himself was one. They were a social class in transition between environments, and they belonged to a society in transition between centuries: from the Victorian age to an era still undefined. For Forster, the citizens of the new suburban communities possessed many of the middle-class virtues that had given England her distinctive character. Their great fault lay in their being too often complacent and too seldom uncertain about their place in the new scheme of things. They were absorbed in the minutiae of position and prestige and property-owning. They wished to be thought cultured but seemed not to understand Culture. After *Howards End*, the fourth and last of these novels, he laid aside any major fictional treatment of this theme. Critics and thesis-writers have wondered why this was so, since *Howards End* brought him his first real popular success, and there seemed much still to be said on the subject. However, *Howards End* marked the end of an era in history as well as a phase in Forster's literary career, for King Edward died in the year the novel was published. The sense of an ending was doubly pervasive; for although the King had seemed to be England's reprieve from Victorian restrictions, at the same time Edward VII was 'the last genuine link with the Victorian age' and, in the words of a contemporary journalist, 'who is now so bold as to dare forecast the nature of the epoch that is now opening?'<sup>1</sup>

Fourteen years elapsed between the end of Forster's suburban

series and the next major work to bring him forcibly to the public's attention. Much happened in that interval, however. He visited India and wrote a few chapters of a novel with an Indian setting but was dissatisfied and laid them aside. He wrote instead a draft of the novel that would become *Maurice* and laid that aside, not only out of dissatisfaction but also because of the criminal penalties for homosexuality. Then came war service in Egypt and a second visit to India. When at last he could complete the Indian novel, it became something entirely new in a fictional sub-genre, the Anglo-Indian novel.<sup>2</sup> That had adhered to several standard patterns: Kipling's scornfully affectionate stories of late-Victorian India; romances of oriental derring-do and beleaguered innocent, genteel but intrepid English ladies; and fictionalised versions of English heroism during the 1857 Mutiny. All of these seem crude beside *A Passage to India* with its subtleties of characterisation and plot and, above all, its implications of great uncertainty about the future of the British Raj. In fact, it was Forster's Indian continuation of a central theme from the suburban novels: complacency, the absence of a saving uncertainty, obsession with the piece of imperial property that was India. Again a Forster novel marked the end of an era. There could be no question that Indian nationalist ferment would grow and grow until it had serious consequences for England and the Empire, which would fall to the forces of British exclusivism and philistinism. He was one of a small minority who held that view. Many readers resisted it. Of those who grudgingly accepted it, few wished to be 'so bold as to dare forecast the nature of the epoch that is now opening?'

Nor could anyone have forecast the future of BBC broadcasting, the enterprise through which Forster, after a few years of indecision, again had a wide public audience. The radio talk was a completely new genre, a re-invention of the spoken word. He brought to it a uniquely personal style, a human voice of technology. For thirty years he talked most often about books that he thought valuable and outstanding, but his inclusive subject was the Culture that rests on a foundation of all the arts. Where Culture is absent, the spirit is impoverished and practical enterprise as well as personal relations will suffer. This conviction has been inherent in all of his works, from the beginning of his career. That is why I have begun with the example of a radio talk of 1946, another time of transition whose future was difficult to forecast – although many dared. Again he pointed out that the issue was a choice between mechanistic and humane values. This talk is more about the problems of providing

postwar housing than about the arts as such. However, in it Forster demonstrates how the humane attitudes shaped by attention to the creative arts can illuminate the most mundane human enterprise.

If he had this important message to deliver, why had his career this pattern of stops and starts? For one thing, when he looked at some literary lions of his acquaintance he feared what literary fame might make him become. His commitment to Culture kept him from doing the fashionable thing and consulting a psychoanalyst about the sources of his fear, for 'these people have no sense of literature and art and I regard with foreboding and resentment their offers to turn an artist upside down.' He had 'stopped creating rather than become uncreative: . . . It's rather that the scraps of imagination and observation in me won't coalesce as they used to.'<sup>3</sup> He was intimidated by the popular assumption that a novelist once begun must go on producing at a regular rate in order to keep the franchise; literary history is littered with proofs of the un wisdom of this assumption. But the salient point about the progression of Forster's literary life is not that he twice abandoned the novel form. It is that however often he wrote, in whatever form, he brought to it a sense of history's turning-points so keen that it turned the genre itself in a new direction.

All passages from E. M. Forster's published and unpublished writings are © the Provost and Scholars of King's College, Cambridge (1994), the Executors of the E. M. Forster Estate. I wish to thank them for permission to use this material, and I am grateful for special assistance from Dr Donald Parry; Miss Jacqueline Cox, Western Manuscripts Archivist, King's College Library; and also her predecessor, Dr Michael Halls.

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E. M. Forster's diaries are among the Western Manuscripts at King's College, and unpublished letters from that archive quoted here are as follows: to Florence Barger, Sir George Barnes (14 October 1946), Henry Brooke (later Lord Brooke of Cumnor), Robert Buckingham, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, Alice Clara Forster, Christopher Isherwood, Elizabeth Poston.

Recipients, with present owners, of other unpublished Forster letters quoted here are as follows: J. R. Ackerley and Malcolm Darling (Humanities Research Center, Austin), Sir George Barnes (23 May 1940, 5 February 1942: BBC Written Archives), Benjamin Britten (Britten-Pears Library), Paul Cadmus (Recipient); Eric Crozier (Britten-Pears Library), Christopher Isherwood (Don Bachardy), Arthur Koestler (Koestler Estate), William Plomer (Durham University Library), Forrest Reid (Stephen Gilbert), D. K. Roberts (British Library), Siegfried Sassoon (Sassoon Estate), Elizabeth Trevelyan (Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge), Lorna Wood (Hofstra University Library), Leonard Woolf (Sussex University Library).

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Passages from Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*; Fielden, *The Natural Bent*; Grisewood, *One Thing at a Time*; Matheson, *Broadcasting* are used by permission of the copyright owners.

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Mary Lago

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# 1

## E. M. Forster: Self and Neighbours

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In the spring of 1946 E. M. Forster was one of ten BBC radio speakers invited to discuss 'The Challenge of Our Time'. Since the time was the beginning of a momentous postwar era and the challenge was enormous, the series was intended to make radio listeners stop and think: in particular, to think ahead to what they hoped might be the future shape of the civilisation they had fought to preserve. Four scientists, two historians (Arthur Koestler being one), a classicist, a theologian, a philosopher and Forster were to consider 'whether and how far the ills of our present world are traceable to causes in human thinking'. Was the war just concluded only a symptom of general unease about the durability of tradition? Was the nation-state consuming the individual? 'Is there a chance of re-creating the social mould?' What about a new synthesis? The present chaos was the dire alternative.<sup>1</sup>

Forster's assigned topic was 'The View of the Creative Artist'. In 1943, in another radio series called 'Security for What?' he had declared himself 'a fanatic on the subject of art'. 'Art' is his comprehensive term for all that makes life more than a routine existence: literature, music, the fine arts, the decorative arts. He believed that it is art that 'distinguishes us from the animals . . . if we stop practising it we shall not rise higher.'<sup>2</sup> In 1946 he expanded this into a message about the conditions essential to the enhancement and preservation of Culture. 'Message' is the correct word, for where Culture was concerned he was an evangelist ardent and single-minded. His definition of Culture included tradition and its continuities, the ability to select wisely for the enlightenment and enjoyment of future generations, personal relations founded upon the holiness of the heart's affections, and the ability to draw delight and nourishment from the arts. Much of the education for Culture begins where formal education leaves off, and this learning does not come easily. Invariably it involves difficult choices. In 1946 Forster talked about the choice between the kind of life created by mechanistic planning and a life

shaped and informed by the creative arts. The series quickly became a debate about choices between morality and expediency. Koestler, the first speaker, drew an analogy between the fate of the Scott Polar Expedition and the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia. The Expedition's remnant might have struggled to safety, had they not tried to carry the failing Evans with them. But the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia saved none of the other countries that fell before Hitler. 'By that time,' said Koestler, 'the number of individual Evanses is counted by the millions'. Morality versus expediency, or utilitarian compromise, or justifying the end by the means is never a philosophical question, but a daily dilemma to which there is no 'final solution' (Koestler's phrase, but poisoned for ever by its Nazi connections). Each generation must find the solution adapted to its own conditions and must act as if ethical absolutes *do* exist. We must, he said, 'apply the brake, or we shall crash'.<sup>2</sup>

Thereafter, with invocations of Wordsworth and Wells, Milton and Marx, the debate concentrates upon the question of whether scientific planning or humanist sympathy is society's best hope. Forster's talk is quite different from the others'. Theirs have the tone of scientists standing firmly on certainties confirmed in the laboratory, or of academics arguing learnedly with one another. Forster speaks gently to the unseen audience. He reminisces about his late-Victorian childhood – irrelevant, surely, after the calamities and upheavals of the war just ended? He says that he is uneasy about his subject. He realises that he is older than the others, perhaps a little out of date. He declares himself an individualist who values old-fashioned reticence and privacy, and courtesy in approaches to society's problems. Looking back, he saw himself as a part of 'the fag-end of Victorian liberalism', when 'challenges were moderate in their tone'. And perhaps more important, people who lived comfortably but not lavishly – that is, the middle classes – felt that all the challenges were manageable. Forster had known and cherished memories of individuals who embodied ideals of intellectual curiosity, respect for the humane virtues, belief in freedom of speech. His own education 'in those far-off and fantastic days made me soft and I am very glad it did', for his experience since then had shown him how harshly the world could treat even the most deserving of individuals. No, he is not out of date, for he knows now that that education, although humane, had been imperfect because economic well-being was taken for granted. Persons of great domestic and civic virtue gave little or no thought to the plantations and mines overseas that

stocked their well-filled larders and swelled their annual dividends. Victorian dividends were fat, and middle-class notions were dim with respect to the overseas exploitation that made such easy income possible. Forster remembered all too well the childhood admonition: 'Dear, don't talk about money, it's so ugly' . . . a Victorian defence mechanism' if ever there was one. Now all that had changed, and he speaks out of his experiences of India and Egypt: the so-called 'backward races', as well as the poor at home, had rebelled and now demanded that they be heard – a development that Forster applauded.

Nor does he wish to be the creative artist who withdraws to the ivory tower and scorns the practical concerns of scientists and economists. In that case, how could he answer the Challenge of Our Time? The answer is to be found in a combination of the new economy and the old morality. Laissez-faire in economics will not work, for the result has been the greed for power that has culminated in the war just over. Some economic planning is essential, most especially at a time of such widespread loss and dislocation. On the other hand, the doctrine of laissez-faire works admirably in the realm of mind and spirit; there, control spawns totalitarianism. Planners tend to scoff at the idealist's fears of totalitarian tyranny, but, said Forster, although the abstract idea of 'the people' is held up as the ideal, he puts his faith in the individual. 'He seems to me a divine achievement and I distrust any view which belittles him.' Here he slips into the direct address to his radio listeners, urgent but encouraging and personal, that made him so successful as a broadcaster. 'If anyone calls you a wretched little individual – and I have been called that – don't you take it lying down. You are important because everyone else is an individual too . . .'

How to resolve this collision of principles? Here Forster invoked his long-loved childhood house and emotional continuing-place: Rooksnest, the original of *Howards End*, near Stevenage in Hertfordshire. He loved that countryside with a passion. It has no Lake Country attractions, no romantic scenery, only gently rolling farmland and villages of ancient history and custom. It was his 'abiding city', and he returned there whenever he could, to visit his childhood home and the people who had become its tenants and his friends. He cherished the sense of the continuity of generations, and sometimes he saw the boy with whom he had played as a child, both of them now in their sixties and his old playmate a grandfather. Perhaps because Forster knew that his immediate family would come to an

end with him, the sense of a line inherited from the past and continuing into the future had all the more meaning for him. Hertfordshire seemed unchanged and unchanging, and therefore reassuring – until a local resident who asked ‘permission to lay a water-pipe was casually informed that it would not be granted since the whole area had been commandeered. Commandeered for what? Hadn’t the war ended?’

But this *was* war, and the foe was a London bureaucracy of planners who lacked even the simple courtesy to inform the local people that a Stevenage New Town of sixty thousand people was to be constructed there. ‘Garden City’ used to be the name and plan for the ideal suburban development. Now ‘satellite town’ was the nomenclature for a development that would gobble up whole fields and bring in a population whose traditions were those of London, not the countryside. ‘Meteorite town would be the better name, for it has fallen on them out of a blue sky.’

Planning asks: why so sentimental? People must have houses. But there was no escaping the fact that if this New Town happened as projected, with a stifling density of new houses, a way of life would be destroyed for ever. Those who moved into the new houses would never know that a way of life had existed that, once eliminated, could never be reconstructed, for it belonged to ‘the world of the spirit’. Bombed-out Britons needed houses, but the planning need not be an assault on the spirit. Expediency had ousted morality and courtesy.

Had he strayed from the topic assigned? Not really, for he wished to state what one writer, at least, saw as the need for some means of satisfying both expediency and morality, planning and *laissez-faire*. Now was the time to speak out, when the end of the war had forced so many new beginnings. And the intellectual has a duty to speak out, for he thinks more consistently in human terms than does the scientist. In Forster’s view the scientist ‘patronises the past, oversimplifies the present, and envisages a future where his leadership will be accepted’. It is easy to imagine a scientist dismissing Forster’s argument out of hand as one-sided and unrealistic. He was accustomed also to being called unrealistic, and that also did not trouble him. He knew that he spoke across a generation gap, not only because the other speakers on this panel were younger, but also because the advocates and practitioners of the new technologies were younger still. Nevertheless, he invited the scientist to ‘come down from his ivory laboratory’ and talk. The humanist’s ascending the

tower was no solution, for he keeps his bearings by being in touch with people. Together at ground level, the scientist-planner (expediency) and the humanist (morality) might together answer the Challenge with houses for the homeless and less damage to landscape and spirit.<sup>4</sup>

This was not Forster's first comment on the ivory tower. In 1938 he had meditated upon its importance to the poet as a retreat in which to convert thoughts and impressions into art. Staying there too long courts sterility, for the real world is inescapable: 'Consequently, [man] is always contradicting himself in his conduct and getting into muddles . . .' Milton, for example, began in seclusion as a Cambridge intellectual, then found that he had no choice but to take sides in the Civil War. After twenty years he returned to the tower and produced works like *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Lost*. Milton was sour and prim, stubborn and opinionated, but he knew when to ascend the tower and when to come down: that is the key. Britain's postwar planners had stayed so long in their tower laboratory that they had lost touch with the spiritual realities.<sup>5</sup>

That flawed Victorian education was at the root of the problem. By trial and error Forster had discarded what had proven unfruitfully utilitarian and had substituted his own philosophy of the developed heart. He was uncomfortable with abstract theorising and often said that his mind simply did not work in that way. He remembered once scolding himself as he fretted up and down a railway platform while awaiting a delayed train. Instead of wasting this time he would consider some Important Abstract Subject: he would think upon Education. But nothing, nothing at all, came to mind, for heart was advising mind.<sup>6</sup> Education in the abstract did not speak to his condition; nor, in his opinion, had it much to say to the condition of England. The really effective education knits itself into every aspect of one's life. It is effective because it is inescapable. The most difficult and perplexed characters in Forster's fiction are those who have stopped learning; some have never even begun. They drift anchorless through life and smash up smaller craft as they go.

Thus his writings contain teachers of various kinds, a variety of educational agencies, and emphasis on possibilities of endless learning. Of the novels, *The Longest Journey* has a boarding school and a master who finds no joy in teaching. In *A Passage to India* the English Principal of a government school, who loves to teach, contends with the rigidities of the British Raj. Italy herself is the teacher in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room with a View*; some of the English are