New and Standard Life of E. M. Forster: II

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ing his audience should appear in his correspondence so defensive, so unsure, so maddeningly discreet, and even, in a couple of instances, a bit underhanded. Of course it is impossible not to wonder what different picture might have emerged had not Hardy's correspondence been so thoroughly winnowed by those bonfires at Max Gate; but it is not true, as is sometimes claimed, that such letters as we have are not revealing. It is, rather, that what they reveal is not at all what the novels and poems would lead us to expect, and that, of course, is precisely why their publication is of such importance.

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4. New and Standard Life of E. M. Forster; II


In his second volume, Mr. Furbank has continued his sensitive and imaginative reconstruction of Forster's life. The great value of the biography, it seems to me, is this: it fills in the lacunae that existed previously concerning Forster's life. We were aware of a surprising number of facts concerning Forster before Furbank's book appeared. We knew that Forster had had a decisive homosexual love affair in Alexandria, we knew that there was a continuing friendship with J. R. Ackerley, we knew that Forster had been intimate with the Robert Buckinghams in the last part of his life, and we knew that Forster was important for the literary generation of Auden, Isherwood, and Spender. But we did not know the exact details of Forster's relationships with all of these people nor how all these people fitted into - and helped construct - the pattern of his life. And we also needed to know - at a less intimate level - Forster's exact activities in, and contributions to, various censorship cases, the B. B. C., and the national Council for Civil Liberties. In short, we needed to know more about Forster's public life in the 1930s and in World War II. Furbank has fleshed out the record admirably and fully. He has shown remarkable tact and discrimination in what he presents from the welter of material at his disposal, so that the biography, it is safe to say, will remain standard. As the Archive at King's College is searched, as the correspondence is gathered and edited, and as the fugitive pieces and unpublished writings are made available, the record will be amplified, though its essential contours will, I am convinced, remain unaltered.

My only cavil would be that I wish for a still longer book, a book that would relate Forster's writings more closely to the event and the people in his life. Thus I would have welcomed either fact
or speculation concerning the originals of the characters in Forster's great novel, *A Passage to India*. And since this work is the jewel in Forster's crown, more interpretive comment would have been of immeasurable value, as the book would be illuminated by the facts that Mr. Furbank has newly made available. The decision not to discuss the contents of *Abinger Harvest* and *Two Cheers for Democracy*, it seems to me, has had somewhat the effect of devaluing Forster, of making him seem more intellectually parochial than he in fact was, of making him seem more of a determined hedonist (he was that, to some degree, in his sexual life) than he was.

At the same time, the full record of Forster's public life, especially during the 1930s and 1940s as Furbank presents it in detail, establishes Forster's firm commitment to humanist values and to civilization in an era of world crises—though he became discouraged, too, by the lack of tangible results from his efforts. Forster probably delineated his own contribution clearly when, in writing for *Time and Tide*, he speculated about the role of the intellectual in forming a climate of opinion for current issues, such as war, rearmament, fascism, and communism. His matured opinion was that it did "matter just a little," if the intellectual were socially conscientious. Forster himself had a tentative or subverting influence, so that he ended by being a sage and a powerful figure for his contemporaries, because he felt that what he had to say mattered "a little," even if it did not matter too much. He honestly expressed his hopes and fears for what they were and had the grace to eschew propaganda. His tenacity, his intellectual flexibility, his sense of incongruity, his modesty, and his integrity made of him a symbolic figure for the intellectuals of the World War II era, as they tried to determine the aspects of liberal culture which they would try to champion in the face of the Nazi menace.

Much of Furbank's skill is literary, because he confers on the subordinate characters in Forster's life the individuality that only a writer of powerful skill could achieve for them. The result is that we are implicated with the people in Forster's life as if they were characters in a novel; we become interested in them as human beings for their own sakes as well as for their effects on Forster. Among the most vivid of these figures are: Mohammed el Adl (the Egyptian with whom Forster had his first major affair and who later died of consumption), Syed Ross Masood (Forster's great Indian friend), the Maharaja of Dewas State Senior (an alternately wise and inept Indian prince and employer of Forster in 1921-1922), J.R Ackerley (a minor writer, not too wise in his personal life but important for providing Forster with an entrée into lower-class life Harry Daley (one of Forster's lovers from the lower class who was somewhat exploitative and restless with him), and, above all, a policeman Bob Buckingham (with whom he fell in love in 1928 and to whom he remained devoted for the rest of his life, dying in his home in Coventry in 1970). Forster came to terms with Bob's marriage and his wife May, and felt as much grief as the parents when
their son died as a young man. Forster's public activities spread his circle wider, and he developed decisive relationships with D. H. Lawrence and T. E. Lawrence, though the first was too violent to last and the second ended in the unforeseen violence of sudden death. Forster's most intense attachments, except for T. E. Lawrence, Ackerley, and Sebastian Sprott, were with men from the lower class. The misogynist quality of Forster's sensibility becomes clearer through Furbank's biography. Such feeling was the result of reaction from the tyranny of his mother and aunts and also from fear of women as they might interfere with his homosexual predilections. It is striking, however, that a homosexual intellectual who was so socially minded had so few women of his own generation as intimates. The women almost all tended to be mother figures when they were not in fact aunts. Florence Barger emerges as the most attractive of Forster's women friends, though she is not mentioned very often in the biography. All this is the more remarkable, perhaps, since Forster is a skilled portrayer of women in his fiction and a champion of them on occasion as they form a repressed class in society. Bloomsbury seems to have meant less to Forster as he grew older. In one sense he may have grown beyond Bloomsbury, since he was able to get on a firmer footing with the radical writers of the 1930s than was Virginia Woolf, who did not completely understand the nature of their political commitment. The deaths of Strachey, Fry, Virginia Woolf, and Clive Bell are not even cited in the biography, though, of course, even in a long book like Furbank's not everything can be mentioned.

One of the great treasures in Furbank's book resides in the excerpts from Forster's unpublished or else ephemeral writings. Here we get the quintessential Forster as he gives his opinions on innumerable subjects - nothing that was human seemed to be alien to him, and he had his Forsterian comments to make on any and all subjects. The book, though it is also much else, is in some sense an anthology of Forster's unknown writings and a delightful collection at that. Let me quote one or two examples from this writer who has always stood at his own particular angle to the universe:

It is easier to personify an enemy-nation than one's own, owing to one's great ignorance of the items that compose it. Only by believing in a Germany have we become patriotic, just as we remained religious only so long as we could believe in a Devil. A menace essential to Faith . . .["Notes on Human Nature Under War Conditions" (1917).]

Listening in the late dusk to gramophone records I did not know . . . When the music stopped I felt something had arrived in the room; the sense of a world that asks to be noticed rather than explained was again upon me. (Commonplace Book, 1937).

London Burning! I watched this event from my Chiswick flat last night with disgust and indignation, but with
no intensity though the spectacle was superb . . .
This is all that a world catastrophe amounts to.
Something which one is too sad and sullen to ap-
preciate. (Diary, Sept. 8, 1940).

The student of early modern literature is grateful for a book at
once so authoritative, so compendious, and so intensely conceived
as Furbank's life of Forster.

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BOOKS RECEIVED

Listing here does not preclude the publication of a review in a
future issue of ELT. Publishers receive two copies of the review.

Biles, Jack I., and Robert C. Evans (eds). William Golding: Some
$15.75.

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