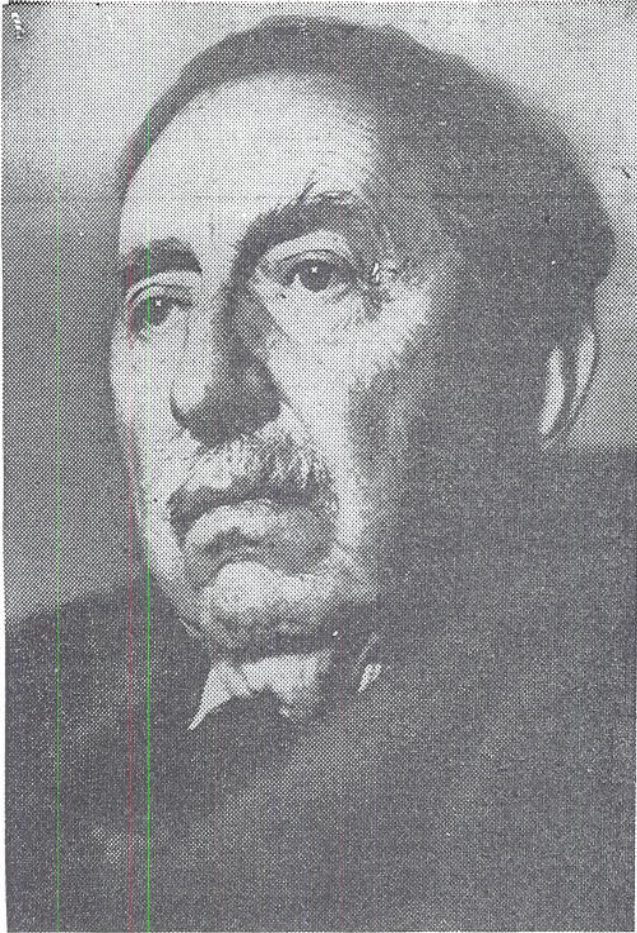


Background story on Forster, on his receiving Order of Merit, 31 Jan 68.

Humanist and Sage

Edward Morgan Forster



Camera Press-Pix

Sensitive, considerate and plucky

By ANTHONY LEWIS

Special to The New York Times

LONDON, Dec. 31—A few months ago Edward Morgan Forster had his first ride in a glider. He remarked afterward: "There is absolutely nothing in it. You go up, and you come down."

The story was told by an old friend, Raymond Mortimer, literary critic of The Sunday Times of London, as an indication of Forster's high spirits at the age of 89 — which is what he was when he made the glider flight. Tomorrow, New Year's Day, is his 90th birthday, and tonight he received from Queen Elizabeth II what is probably the highest distinction a British sovereign can bestow for achievement in life apart from politics: Membership in the Order of Merit, a select club limited to 24 in number. From now on it will be E. M. Forster, O.M.

Some might see another point in the glider flight and Forster's reaction to it. That is his determined matter-of-factness. As a writer and as

a human being he has always been a master of understatement, an enemy of hyperbole.

The millions who learned to love the novel by reading Forster will remember the strong element of melodrama. Death comes suddenly from a runaway horse, a physical seizure, with no warning to the reader. But it comes in a spare paragraph or even sentence, so devoid of adjectival signals that the skimming reader might skip right by it.

'Passage' Made Him Famous

When asked, as he often is, why he has written no novels for more than four decades, Forster gives various self-deprecatory answers. One is: "Well, I hadn't anything more I wanted to say."

His last novel, the one that made him a world-famous figure, was "A Passage to India," published in 1924. Its delicate tracing of the unbridgeable differences between the English colonial masters and their Indian subjects was characteristically Forsterian in the air of mystery and in the kindness to both parties.

The book may also have had real political influence: it helped to nurture, in a liberal British generation, the feeling that for all her decent, practical intentions, Britain was out of place in the Eastern world and would have to leave. It took 20 years, a world war and a Labor party victory to convince a British Government of that.

It may be romanticism of a quiet kind, but some admirers of Forster would vote for his earlier novels over the much better-known "A Passage to India."

Wrote Four Other Books

He wrote four others, all between 1905, when he was 26, and 1910: "Where Angels Fear to Tread," "The Longest Journey," "A Room With a View" and "Howards End." Their subject is mostly love—but then Forster might say that that is his subject.

In a book of essays to be published tomorrow, "Aspects of E. M. Forster," William

Roerick tells of the time Forster came to America in 1947 to deliver a lecture at Harvard on "The Raison d'Être of Criticism in the Arts."

He had done the piece in a hurry and did not demur when Mr. Roerick said he thought he could improve it by some reordering. But Forster told Mr. Roerick, "Just be sure it says 'love' at the beginning, in the middle and at the end."

In the same essay collection W. J. H. Sprott says that "when Forster stopped writing novels he became a sage," adding, "This was not of course, taking on another occupation, like a plumber becoming a bricklayer; sagacity was there from the start."

Forster, since the novels, has published a large amount of criticism and comment and biography, beginning with "Aspects of the Novel" in 1927.

Aristocracy of the Plucky

In 1939, in an article called "What I Believe," he expressed his political views in language that has not become less relevant. The piece appears in his collection, "Two Cheers for Democracy," and says:

"I believe in aristocracy, though . . . not an aristocracy of power, based upon rank and influence, but an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky.

"Its members are to be found in all nations and classes, and all through the ages, and there is a secret understanding between them when they meet. They represent the true human tradition, the one permanent victory of our queer race over cruelty and chaos.

"Thousands of them perish in obscurity, a few are great names. They are sensitive for others as well as for themselves, they are considerate without being fussy, their pluck is not swankiness but the power to endure, and they can take a joke."

Active at Cambridge

Forster describes himself as a humanist, with no belief in religion. But even that he cannot take too seriously. Asked recently whether, at his death, he would not like a concert in the beautiful chapel of his beloved King's College, Cambridge, he replied:

"Oh no, not the chapel. That would smell too much of religion. It would be letting the humanists down."

He was a student at King's College 70 years ago. In 1946 he was made an honorary fellow and decided to go back to King's to live. He has been there since, taking an active part in college matters and seeing the students freely. He never married.

While publishing infrequently in recent years, he has continued to write friends in the familiar clear, unheightened prose. On President Kennedy's death in 1963, he wrote:

"People will settle down, of course, and resume their company-director smiles. But the main turning towards safety has been lost."