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the fertile fact

"Almost any biographer, if he respects facts, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection. He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders"

-Virginia Woolf

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#24. "Easy to chronicle, bewildering to practice": EM Forster

Richard Canning is the author of *Brief Lives: EM Forster*. Belonging to the "fag end of Victorian liberalism" (his words), EM Forster (1879–1970) occupies a slightly awkward place in British literary history – a contemporary of modernists like Virginia Woolf, but not one of them, he effectively stopped writing after his best novel, 1924's *A Passage to India*. Author of one of the earliest (and still resonant) satires of modern tourism (1908's *A Room With a View*), he once wrote "we exist not in ourselves, but in terms of other people's minds". Taking this literally (as is the wont of this website), Richard forecasts Forster's reaction to the twenty-first century.

Words: Richard Canning



EM Forster would be 134 years old in 2013. He is an awkward figure to propel in to our own day, since in his lifetime he began as a conservative in many ways and grew ever more steadily uncomfortable with the "modern" age. In 1945, he reflected that he "smelt sometimes of the grave", yet had a quarter century more life to come. In his youth, bicycles were a growing threat; later in life, Forster found being interrupted by the telephone frustrating. Nevertheless, he had famously progressive politics in the contexts of the Empire and colonialism – as reflected in his greatest novel, *A Passage to India* (1924) – and in sexual ethics, as captured in the posthumously published *Maurice* (1917/1971).

1. Gay bookstores

Forster's London bolthole was in Bloomsbury, where, just nine years after his death, Britain's first gay and lesbian bookstore was founded – Gay's the Word. Incredibly, the shop has survived the advent of online retailing, and thrives today, unlike almost all of its peers in the United States. I imagine Forster dropping in on Uli and Jim regularly to check on the latest titles, and perhaps also to cruise, ever so discreetly. He could find out precisely who has bought his own novel, *Maurice*, one of the first gay fictions to feature a happy ending. He would have been thrilled to see how many readers today admire it, especially given the doubts he recorded on the manuscript, discovered after his death: "Publishable – but worth it?"

2. Plastic surgery

A slightly contentious choice. In 1925, though, Forster recorded in his diary that he was:

"Famous, wealthy, miserable, physically ugly – red nose enormous, round patch in middle of scalp... Face in the distance is toad-like and pallid... Take no bother over nails or teeth... Stomach increases, but not yet visible under waistcoat. The anus is clotted with hairs..."

Enough already! Let us ship the stooping, drooping author to Harley Street forthwith, for the mother of all makeovers.

3. Contemporary dance

Like so many of his artistic peers, Forster beat a path to Covent Garden in 1913 to catch Vaslav Nijinsky dancing almost naked in *L'Après-midi d'un faune*. History has confirmed the vital legacy of the Ballets Russes and its still seismic re-envisioning of the possibilities of dance, in particular by placing the male form at its heart. Whenever I frequent Sadler's Wells, I spot an EM Forster, gently perspiring in a raincoat and poring over the photographs in the colour programme.

4. Cheap (and frequent) flights

It is hard to imagine Forster getting on well with low-cost airlines. He didn't mind "roughing it", but there were limits. He surely would have appreciated the general lowering of costs since his own travelling days, however. Forster never lacked for the money he needed to venture abroad – particularly to Italy, Egypt and India – but he would have marveled at the frequency of flights, not only to these countries, but to many others. I often imagine him in lands he never dreamed of visiting – from Montenegro to Morocco, and perhaps even northwards, to Iceland and Scandinavia. He would not have packed well – though his lover's wife May Buckingham might have helped him fold a shirt or two.

5. The reputation of Benjamin Britten

Forster knew his own worth; he turned down a knighthood not on grounds of modesty, but because it was not enough. He was, though, keen to see those whom he admired getting their due. The composer Benjamin Britten is presently enjoying a rich centenary year, with new productions of all of his major works – including that for which Forster wrote the libretto, *Billy Budd* (1951). He had inspired Britten's first operatic composition, *Peter Grimes* (1945), through an article on the poet on whose work it was based, George Crabbe ('To think of Crabbe is to think of England'). Forster was Britten and Peter Pears' guest at the first Aldeburgh Festival in 1948 and, although he would experience tensions in their own collaboration, Forster remained proud of the finished work, arguably his last major piece of writing.

Brief Lives: E M Forster (2009) is published by Hesperus Books, available in good bookshops. Richard is completing the first critical biography of cult novelist Ronald Firbank, for publication in 2015.

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