

## Maugham at Eighty

SOMERSET MAUGHAM celebrates his eightieth birthday this month. There is scarcely anyone living who can remember a time when he was not one of the most prominent figures upon the literary scene. For over twenty years he has enjoyed a unique supremacy. Writers, he has said more than once, have their ups and downs, but for nearly half a century the current of his own success has been unchecked. An occasional play may have been taken off after a few weeks' run, but its withdrawal has usually coincided with the presence of a novel high in the best-seller list. Few writers have dominated their day to an equivalent extent.

He has held the public's interest not only by his work but by his personality. Many of his stories have been told in the first person; he has appeared on the screen as the compère of his films; he has been photographed and interviewed so often that his appearance, habits, tastes, prejudices, general way of life, are familiar to all whom such matters interest. Yet even so, an air of mystery surrounds him. People continue to ask, "What is he really like?" A legend has grown up around him.

Right from the start he has been the object of curiosity and conjecture. His popularity in alternating terms of book-sales and box-office returns has been consistent, but his reputation in regard to critical opinion has known marked fluctuations. In 1918 W. L. George, who was very far from being a dilettante, published a book called *A Novelist on Novels*. In it, he posed the question, Who were the men who in 1940 would be occupying the positions at that moment filled by Wells, Bennett, Galsworthy, and Conrad? Maugham is not mentioned in the book although *Of Human Bondage* had been published only a few months before. It

may well seem today astonishing that he was not, but his career in retrospect presents both in his life and work a fascinating sequence of surprises, anomalies, and contradictions. On an occasion such as this it is interesting to plot their graph. And in the first place it is important to remember that though it was as a novelist that he began his career, at the turn of the century, it was as a dramatist, a writer of social comedies, that eight years later he achieved his first spectacular success.

HIS first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, was a brutal, vivid story of life in Bermondsey for which his experiences as a doctor had given him first-hand information, "his little black bag protecting him in the foul courts that the police hesitated to enter." It earned him in royalties during the first year only £20 but it impressed the critics and its reception encouraged him to abandon medicine. He had been left a small sum of money and he decided to invest it in himself. He went abroad and set himself to become a writer. He was then twenty-three.

During the next few years he published several novels including *Mrs. Craddock*. They did not earn much money but they were reviewed respectfully and at length. He was also working upon plays, one of which, *A Man of Honour*, was produced by the Stage Society. It was subsequently published in the *Fortnightly Review*, but it was too sombre and realistic to attract the commercial theatre. It contained, however, a scene of comedy, whose reception made Maugham suspect that he would be wise to exploit this line. He wrote *Lady Frederick*. In its big scene a woman in her thirties reveals herself to a young admirer without her make-up. Managers shook their heads. No leading actress, they assured him, would display

herself at such a disadvantage; Maugham wrote another comedy, *Mrs. Dot*. This time, Managers told him that he was too cynical. But he persisted and at last had a lucky break. A play at the Court had to be taken off earlier than had been expected, and its successor was not yet ready. *Lady Frederick* was put on as a stop-gap for a six-weeks' run. The scene in which the leading actress revealed the intimacies of her toilet "brought down the house" and the play ran a year.

Managers now decided that after all he was not too cynical and sought his wares. He had a number of plays in the drawer—*Mrs. Dot*, *Jack Straw*, *The Explorer*. Within a few weeks his name was on the boards of four simultaneous successes, and *Punch* had a cartoon showing Shakespeare enviously looking at the playbills. That was in 1908.

Few writers have enjoyed a more sensational success. But it was not the kind of success to impress the *avant-garde* criticism of the day. Popularity is always an object of distrust and 1908 marked the peak of a period that was in violent reaction against the languid eccentricities of the nineties. Art, it was then held, should have a purpose: and it was to the plays of Shaw and Galsworthy and the novels of H. G. Wells that the young turned for authority and guidance. Maugham, in their eyes, had no message. He did not want to improve people or to expose abuses. It was held that "he stood for nothing" and that he was merely "an entertainer." His stock in 1910 stood lower with the intelligentsia than it had in 1900, and for quite a while nothing happened to make the intelligentsia reconsider its verdict.

For the next seven years he wrote exclusively for the stage. Walking past the Comedy Theatre where the "House Full" boards were up outside *Mrs. Dot*, he thought, at the sight of a sunset above Panton Street, "Thank God, I can look at a sunset now without having to think how to describe it." He planned never to write another book. But he had reckoned without his temperament. He found himself living in his own past. "It became," he wrote, "such a burden to me that I made up my mind that I could only regain my peace by writing it all down in the form of a novel." That was shortly

before World War I and the novel was *Of Human Bondage*.

It was published in 1916 and it made little stir. It had no bearing on the war and the very qualities that have given it a capacity to interest the readers of later generations prevented it from succeeding then. It dealt with permanent problems at a time when the public was concerned with the day's events. No, it is not surprising that W. L. George writing in 1918 should have failed to realise on the evidence of a single book that the course of Maugham's career had changed direction. The betting was a hundred to one against any such occurrence. But this happened to be the hundredth time.

"Success," he was to write twenty years later in *The Summing Up*, "may well cut the author off from the material that is its source," and this might have been his fate. His plays earned him a great deal of money at a time when income tax was low; he bought himself a house in Mayfair, and soon after married. Had the marriage proved a happy one he would presumably have led a fashionable metropolitan life, writing Mayfair comedies, until after a dozen years or so his material wore thin. Luckily for literature that did not happen. His marriage was a failure. Personal unhappiness made him dissatisfied both with the life that he was leading and the work he was producing. "I was tired of the man I was," he wrote, "and it seemed to me that by a long journey to some far country I might renew myself."

He was forty then, and the exigencies of his war-time duties in Intelligence simplified the cutting of his links with England. They gave him a chance of visiting the South Pacific. As soon as the war was over he went to China. The South Seas gave him *Rain* and *The Moon and Sixpence*, but the Far East was to give him more; it brought him back to the material he understood. He had roots in Malaya to an extent that he had never had in Mayfair.

He had been educated at one of the smaller Public Schools, and it was from this type of school that were recruited the bank clerks, district officers and planters who people his Malayan stories. The lives that were led in England by the cousins and brothers of his characters, in the prim domesticities of suburbia,

would have bored him inexpressibly but their own lives against the background of the East were vivid, violent, and dramatic: or perhaps it would be more true to say that he interpreted their lives in terms of violent and vivid drama.

He wrote always about what are called "ordinary people," but he showed them under the pressure of unusual circumstance. A large number of his Far Eastern stories end with suicide or murder, and adultery is the pivot for a large proportion of them. They are long stories, 15,000 to 20,000 words, roughly the length of a play, and two of them, *Rain* and *The Letter*, were capable of almost direct transference to the stage. His mind was adjusted to the types of plot and theme that fitted within this circumference. It is a length that few writers have managed to employ. But it is a very satisfactory length. It takes an hour to read, and it gives scope for the introduction of settings and of minor characters. By writing at this length Maugham was able to keep the background of the East constantly before the reader's eye. He rarely attempted what is called "fine writing" but his scenic descriptions are masterpieces of accurate observation. You touch and smell the East. You can understand how in that atmosphere "ordinary people" could be driven to desperate remedies.

He recreated himself during a decade of travel and his output during this period was remarkable: two novels—*The Moon and Sixpence* and *The Painted Veil*; two travel books *On a Chinese Screen* and *The Gentleman in the Parlour*; one of his very best plays, *East of Suez*; the collection of secret service stories which introduced the character of Ashenden, his *alter ego*; the six South Sea stories of *The Trembling of a Leaf*; the six Malayan stories of *The Casuarina Tree* which included *The Letter*; a number of short stories awaiting publication in book form. 1922 also saw the triumphant success of a play written in 1915, *Our Betters*, while *The Constant Wife*, though in London it never recovered from an unlucky first night, ran for many months in New York. The period may be said to close with the gay, light-hearted and malicious *Cakes and Ale*.

The publication of *Cakes and Ale* saw Maugham established as the most discussed

personality in English Letters. He was not only producing a sequence of exciting and dramatic stories, but he was in tune with the temper of his time. He had had no message for the eager young Fabians of 1908 who had discussed woman's suffrage over glasses of Russian tea, but he had for an exhausted post-war generation, that had achieved victory at the cost of immense self-sacrifice only to find that the war that was to end war—H. G. Wells' phrase—was being followed by the peace that would end peace. Maugham was in the same leaking boat. In spite of his wealth and fame he was reputed to be an embittered man. He had won, after long labour, to success, only to find its savour that of dead sea fruit. Disenchanted himself, he offered to his readers the philosophy and pattern of escape. Where Kipling had presented the British Empire in terms of "The White Man's Burden" Maugham presented it as a means of cutting free from the Western "rat-race," from the profitless amassing of possessions that moth and dust were waiting to corrupt. *The Moon and Sixpence*, *The Casuarina Tree*, and *The Fall of Edward Barnard* coloured the outlook of the disillusioned 1920's just as *Anne Veronica* and *Man and Superman* had fired the optimism of the last Edwardians. Maugham was the mouthpiece of that decade.

For ten years he lived in suitcases. Then he felt the need of a home, a base, and bought high on Cap Ferrat the villa that can be seen right along the coast from Antibes, white and rectangular against the pines, and set on its gatepost the sign against the evil eye that is stamped upon all his books.

In the preface he wrote in 1952 to the selected edition of Kipling's stories, he suggested that authors usually reach the full development of their powers between the ages of 35 and 40, do their best work for the next fifteen to twenty years, then start to decline. He may have thought of himself as being about to enter upon this final stage when he moved into the Villa Mauresque.

WHEN the Germans broke through to the Channel ports in the spring of 1940, Maugham, in his sixty-fifth year, had to make a snap decision. Should he stay on at the Villa

Mauresque or risk a return to England through submarine-infested waters. There was a third alternative—a phial of sleeping pills in his bathroom drawer. He never considered the possibility of letting himself be taken prisoner, but he must in that hour of decision have contrasted the dangers and discomforts of that journey with the amount of enjoyment life had still to offer him.

It may not have seemed to offer him so very much. A few years back he had retired from the theatre with his last three plays little more than half successes. In *The Summing Up*, published two years before, he had stated that the main fabric of his work was now complete and though he might add a turret here or a gable there, what was to come would be decoration. He had exhausted his Far East material; the south of France had supplied him with one or two amusing plots, *The Three Fat Women of Antibes* in particular: but the issues in that charming playground were less vital, less dramatic. He had made a disappointing trip to the West Indies. I was to remark to him twelve years later on the eve of sailing for the Leeward Islands that although I had spent many months in the Caribbean I had only found two or three plots there. He had had, he said, a similar experience. Kipling had told him that there were plenty of plots there “but that they were mine not his. I went but I found nothing.”

The life of the French convicts on Devil’s Island gave him two short stories, and a motif in *A Christmas Holiday*. But that was all.

In 1937 he had gone to India. He had felt for many years that Kipling had covered the ground too completely for it to be worth his while to go. But Kipling’s world no longer existed, and “I should be trying,” he said, “to see a different India. I found a lot. As soon as the maharajahs realised that I didn’t want to go on tiger hunts but that I was interested in seeing poets and philosophers, they were very helpful. I planned to return there in the autumn of 1939: the war prevented that. I think I should have got a great deal from a second visit.”

As he deliberated the alternative to that phial of sleeping pills, he must have suspected that in the cancelling of that trip to India his last chance of recreating himself had gone. In

*A Personal Record* he tells us that he decided to return because he felt that one or two people in England might still need him. He made the decision on unselfish grounds. But had he taken those pills he would have missed a climax to his career that he can scarcely in his most ambitious moments have envisaged.

The most for which writers can reasonably hope in their last years is a quiet sunset. A new generation will have knocked down the gates, a new generation that will demand a different nourishment. The ageing novelist may be treated with deference, may sit upon committees and preside at banquets, but his books will not be read. That might well have befallen Maugham had he spent his later sixties in the sunshine of the south of France, surrounded by his books and friends and pictures, looking towards the Esterelles, whose final peaks must have reminded him of the Moorea that he had described so well. He had everything “that should accompany old age.” But the same destiny that quarter of a century earlier broke up his marriage, once again intervened, destroyed the atmosphere of comfort that might have stifled him and gave him a last opportunity to recreate himself.

He returned to England by the coal boat, to find no useful occupation. He spent a few weeks in London, then crossed to America. Control of currency was strict. He could take no money out of England. His continental income was frozen and he arrived in New York with two dollars in his pocket, to be instructed by the British Treasury authorities in Washington that he must turn over to them all the dollars that he earned, in return for which they would make him what they considered a reasonable allowance. He was homeless and alone, but his publishers lent him a bungalow in the Carolinas, and there, in exile, driven back upon himself, he set to work again upon a major novel. That novel, *The Razor’s Edge*, was as lucky in its timing in the second war, as *Of Human Bondage* had been unlucky in the first. Wartime conditions, with the black-out and the curtailment of entertainment, had created a demand for reading matter that the publishers could not satisfy. Old books went out of print, and though new books were issued in rationed quantities the standard

of contemporary writing was very low. The young writers were in uniform, the elder ones were either too busy or too harassed to write well or had put aside their pens for war work. It was, in 1944, both for the general reader and the critic, an immense relief to be offered a mature, adult novel, the work of a perfected craftsman, working within his powers, with an exact knowledge of those powers and with the sense of reserves behind him. *The Razor's Edge* is told in the first person and nowhere has Maugham deployed that particular technique with more assurance. Never had he been more mellow.

The timing for the theme too was lucky. The plot is that of *The Fall of Edward Barnard*. (How often authors rewrite their old stories after twenty-five years from a different angle: *Theatre* is a retelling of *Mrs. Craddock*.) Two friends, Americans, fall in love with the same girl. Their friendship is not ruined by her choice between them. The fiancé goes to Europe to make his fortune; but while away he loses his faith in "the American way of life," refuses to return to America and stands aside while the girl marries the other man. It is the same plot as *Edward Barnard*, but the theme is different. For whereas Edward Barnard made an escapist's choice, living on in Tahiti, idly, with a pretty Polynesian, the hero of *The Razor's Edge* refused the conventional pattern out of a discovery in himself of a sense of purpose, a working towards the life of a mystic and ascetic. It was a theme appropriate to the hour. Escapism is sympathetic to a decade of disenchanted lassitude, but it is not sympathetic in an hour of strain and action. In *The Razor's Edge* Maugham offered hope; he had got past bitterness. Yet he was not throwing out his solution as a sop. He wrote as a man with faith.

In theme and content, *The Razor's Edge* is one of his major books. It is a long novel with a number of secondary stories woven into the central plot. Yet "the direction of interest," which is his own definition of a plot, is never lost. The book was a great immediate success and it laid the foundation for the fame he was to enjoy after the war, when he returned to France.

Fame is the proper word to use. During the

1930's he had been sensitive to the lack of recognition that he had received from the intelligentsia. "When clever young men write essays about contemporary fiction they never think of considering me." He said more than once that he considered himself unlucky to have begun writing short stories at a time when Chekhov's stock stood so high and Maupassant's so low, and the preface to his collected edition of short stories, *Altogether*, consists in large part of a comparison between Maupassant and Chekhov. He had also mentioned that the French admire order, pattern, and form, and that his reputation stood higher in France than it did in England. More than once he had felt it necessary to defend the magazine short story. But now he had the highbrows on his side. Time had placed him in perspective.

A writer, he had said, should produce an *œuvre*, and time had shown how substantial a body of work his was; it had shown too how much of it was impervious to time. His back books were in demand. Several of his plays had been revived: *The Circle* in London, *The Constant Wife* in New York. Television, in search of plays and stories, turned to him. The younger generation that had broken down the gates could not compete with him in its own post-war media. But the final proof of his skill as a story-teller was the bold experiment of producing four of his short stories in a single film. The odds against such an experiment's success were high. But *Quartet* succeeded so triumphantly that it was followed by *Trio* and later by *Encore*. Could any other story-teller have stood that test? One or two of the stories were altered out of a belief that their screen effect would thus be heightened, in particular *The Colonel's Lady*. The stories that were altered were the least effective. Maugham was himself the best judge of how to tell his own kind of story.

AT THE end of *A Writer's Notebook*, Maugham allows himself to wonder what part, if any, of his work will be read a century hence. He is becomingly modest on the issue, but at the same time he is not unconscious of his unique position. *Of Human Bondage* is the most read of his

books and the most generally admired. I asked him once if he considered it his best. He said he had no idea, since he had not read it since he corrected the final proofs. It may seem odd that curiosity should not have sent him back to it, but it is typical of him that he should have resisted the impulse, knowing that he could do nothing now to better it.

In *A Writer's Notebook* he expresses doubt as to whether so long a book can hope to survive the pressure of the future. But it is, it seems to me, on other grounds that *Of Human Bondage* is less likely to appeal to succeeding generations than many of his short stories. He has said himself that though a writer may set out to draw a picture of life, it can never be more than a partial one, but if he is fortunate he will succeed in doing something else, he will draw a complete picture of himself. And though Maugham has called *Of Human Bondage* an autobiographical novel, there is less of the essential Maugham there than in *Cakes and Ale* and in *The Moon and Sixpence*. Philip in *Of Human Bondage* may have shared many of Maugham's experiences, but he is not Maugham; he is an obscure doctor, not a successful author. A man with Maugham's temperament would never have remained obscure.

In a few years time, inevitably, Maugham's reputation will undergo a slump. He has been so long supreme, and those who enthrone a new deity will find it necessary to increase the praise of the new god by decrying the

qualities of the old. But I cannot believe that the reaction will last for long. Several of his books may go out of print for ever, but there are so few great story-tellers, and few have equalled Maugham's capacity to carry your interest on from one page to the next. You cannot put him down, not only because of the excellence of the plot but for the manner of its telling. It is not chance that led him to put an Arab charm against the evil eye upon the covers of his books. He has a deep affinity with those story-tellers of the market place who hold their audience with the power of their eye, the intonation of their voice, the movements of their hands. He lays his individual spell upon you, so that in retrospect you remember not only the tale itself, but the teller of it. The story is a medium, a means to an end, and future generations will, I am very sure, be as fascinated as we ourselves have been by this enigmatic man, the object of so much conjecture, a man at the same time so thwarted and so rewarded, a man who has been offered the sampling of every dish the banquet of life has for offering, yet has been denied on his own admission the very consolations that alone make life tolerable for the vast majority of human beings; a man so disillusioned, so unself-deceived, so ruthless towards himself yet to others so invariably helpful; a man who in the last analysis has always been upon the side of what was true and simple, of what the Greeks called "the beautiful and good."

# Music

## WORDS AND MUSIC

I CANNOT imagine anyone who is interested in either of the metrical arts not being fascinated by Dr. Curt Sachs' recent book: *Rhythm and Tempo: A Study in Music History* (Dent, 42s.). Immensely learned though he is, Dr. Sachs has a gift for clear exposition with which scholars are not always endowed and, except for a few pages on Proportional Signatures which, I must confess, made my poor head go round, the reader with only an amateur knowledge of music will find him quite easy to follow.

To read any history of music is to be unpleasantly reminded of the fantastic narrowness of the conventional concert repertoire. Despite the curse of Babel, it is much easier to get to know foreign and ancient literature than it is to hear any music other than that composed in Europe after 1600. Of course it is always possible that we are not missing much. Musicologists have their own and, for them, quite proper approach to music, but it does not always coincide with the listener's. I am tantalised, for example, by the few bars quoted by Dr. Sachs from the French manneristic composers of the 14th century, but when I find that Dr. Sachs admires Edgar Varèse's *Ionization*, a work which I have had the misfortune to hear, I get worried.

Dr. Sachs recognises two basic kinds of rhythm, divisive and additive. Divisive rhythm is based on the human stride and is therefore 2/4 or 4/4 time. The East knows no other and cannot recognise a rhythm in triple time. Additive rhythm, which Dr. Sachs believes to be associated with the "tension and relaxation that we experience in breathing in and out," can be on the other hand, and generally is in triple time, for its patterns are not based on "a certain duration to be divided into equal parts, but rather a grouping composed of longer and shorter elements, such as 2 + 1 or 3 + 2 units, or any other arrangements of shorts and longs." In poetry the approximate equivalents are the

purely accentual prosody of, say, Anglo-Saxon poetry on the one hand, and the strictly quantitative metres of Greek poetry on the other. French and Italian poetry, which reckon by the number of syllables, are, presumably, more additive than divisive. Where English poetry should be placed, which, since *Ormulum*, is composed of feet, but feet which are made by accent not by length, I am not quite sure.

In music, according to Dr. Sachs, "any rhythm related to harmony must be of a divisive kind. Additive rhythm belongs to civilisations without harmony." The former he associates with classicistic cultures and a feeling in the visual arts for perspective, the latter with more other-worldly cultural phases. Thus, in the Gothic Middle Ages, ternary time and counterpoint are dominant; in the High Renaissance, 4/4 time and harmony carry all before them; since 1900, Dr. Sachs sees a return to additive rhythms.

The association of accentual double time with perspective is a fascinating one, but when Dr. Sachs says "Greek-Roman art took an important turn to perspective, imperfect, it is true, at the beginning of the Common Era, as evidenced in the paintings of Pompeii and Herculaneum. There is a strong possibility that the change from metre to accentual rhythm in later antiquity was a kindred phenomenon," I become suspicious. Early Latin poetry, like vulgar-spoken Latin, was an accentual tongue, upon which, during the classic period of Latin poetry, a Greek prosody was imposed. If Dr. Sachs' generalisations were always true, then it would follow that in their early days, the Romans were interested in perspective: and what about the Germanic peoples who always had an accentual verse?

By the time a language can have a literature, it is more or less a fixed medium and its rhythmic possibilities are much more limited, much more resistant to cultural changes than