

Richard E. Zeikowitz (ed.), 2008.
Letters between Forster and Isherwood
on Homosexuality and Literature
(New York: Palgrave Macmillan)

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The book edited by Richard E. Zeikowitz *Letters between Forster and Isherwood on Homosexuality and Literature* is composed, as its title suggests, of a selection of letters covering the long friendship between Edward Morgan Forster (1879–1970) and Christopher Isherwood (1904–1986). In the introduction, Zeikowitz sketches the background of the close relations between the two writers. The letters lack subjective commentaries on the part of the editor. His references to them are informative and factual. The letters are grouped in three sections (pre-war years, the war years and post-war years) and include very personal outlooks of the authors on war, love and writing. And among these themes, there is one, as Zeikowitz notices, which “surfaces subtly throughout all three periods of the correspondence [that] is each writer’s life as a homosexual in a society where one could not openly express one’s sexual preference” (2). However, as he rightly points out, homosexuality is veiled and manifests itself mostly through the references to Forster’s and Isherwood’s respective partners. The poignant story of social isolation and political exclusion, of fear and uncertainty but simultaneously of passion, love, and understanding is told through the descriptions of the ordinary and the everyday, through journeys long and short, through meetings of friends and discussions of books. In Zeikowitz’s words, “[o]ne needs to coax out details from between the lines” (2).

In his engaging foreword, Zeikowitz, apart from stressing the importance of a homosexual theme, draws our attention also to the generational difference between Forster and Isherwood and the disparity in size of their individual oeuvres at the time when their friendship began (while Forster was already an established author of several novels, Isherwood had just finished his second). Nevertheless, neither the age gap nor the men’s unequal writing

experience precluded them from building a close and lasting (over thirty years) bond based on mutual understanding and respect. Forster treated Isherwood as a laudable disciple, praised his talent and encouraged his literary undertakings, but at the same time considered his younger colleague an intimate friend. As for Isherwood, he genuinely admired Forster for his art of writing and his honest approach to life in all its aspects. And the letters we find in Zeikowitz's book give evidence to that. They brim with accounts of their literary development as well as with discussions on personal, often intimate or socially awkward, topics.

It is with pleasure that one reads the introduction to the letter exchange between Forster and Isherwood. The recollected dates and events are shrewdly mixed with intriguing, funny or otherwise interesting statements quoted from the letters of the writers. Consequently, on the one hand Zeikowitz supplies us with several facts, for instance how the writers met, at which point of their respective careers that happened, or who belonged to their social circles; and, on the other hand, he offers the readers an abbreviated account of the friendship and allows a few glimpses into the correspondence via compelling quotations. Thanks to that, the readers' curiosity as how those events, places, and people were actually viewed, presented, and commented on in the letters by Forster and Isherwood is aroused.

Part 1, "The 1930s", is dominated by the discussion on *Maurice* and the current writing projects of each man. The letters of that period show us also how the affection between Forster and Isherwood deepens, matures, and develops. Moreover, this is the time when the nature of their relation is established, namely for years to come the two are doomed to a long distance friendship. It is especially visible in the case of Isherwood and his extensive travels. Reading his letters, readers are constantly on the move—they experience with him the pre-war Germany, Greece, the Canary Islands, China, Portugal and America, to mention but a few. This geographical separation in turn translates into different political/cultural/social perspectives observed in the letters of Isherwood and Forster. Nevertheless, being apart does not weaken the bond between the two. Their letters become captivating evidence of an emotionally strong and intellectually engaging relationship.

The happiness stemming from mutual understanding and the feeling of being important to each other so prevalent in the letters is unfortunately tainted with the spread of Nazi ideology and the approaching war. Both Forster and Isherwood verbalize their fears frequently and sadly admit that

the rise of fascism cannot be prevented. Nonetheless, they try hard to forget the ominous reality or at least to think about it less often. Among others, they do it by employing a cheerful, sometimes ironic, tone in the letters and by focusing on minute details of everyday life (“I stopped this letter for five minutes in order to torture two blood sucking flies to death. Living here has made me fiendishly cruel. [...] I feel like Macbeth”. Isherwood to Forster, 23). This is especially visible in the endings of their letters, just to quote a few examples:

“Please write to me. Nobody ever does, it seems. I need a letter a day to keep the horrors away.” (Isherwood to Forster, 23)

“Do write again soon. God knows, my letters aren’t worth answering, but write in human charity” (Forster to Isherwood, 26)

“Please write and tell me the colour of Mr Abercrombie’s pyjamas. I do hope you will have a good time.” (Forster to Isherwood, 30)

“This letter now comes abruptly to an end. There are too many domestic disturbances. I have to keep stopping to throw my shoes out of the window at the ducks, who are not allowed into the lower garden: and each time I do this, the cook very politely brings them back. Then the cat keeps attacking the chickens and Heinz hammers loudly: he has just discovered that the rabbits’ skyscraper is so big that he can’t get it out of the carpentry room—so they will presumably have to live there. I will write again soon, and hope you do the same.” (Isherwood to Forster, 57)

In Part 2, “The War Years: 1939–45”, the separation between Forster and Isherwood continues, yet now the gap is more than the distance. During the war they undoubtedly live in two extremely different realities. Although both locations (Europe, where Forster is, and America, where Isherwood decides to stay) are contaminated with the war, the general picture of England and Europe which emerges from the letters of Forster is dark, or gray at best, shadowy and hungry, a stark contrast to the life depicted by Isherwood, the life still filled with pick-nicks, laughter and music. While Forster is trying very

hard “to be in good spirits and pick up scraps of art” for instance by noticing that “London looks lovely when it is moonlight, and has a charming ultra-violet lamp at the bottom of the Haymarket, which looks like a fuchsia and lights up the luminous paint upon the sand bags” (89), Isherwood admires the American countryside: “I’m answering [your letter] from the train, en route for California [...]. The train is dragging very slowly through the state of Kansas, [...]: pretty woods, and fields of alfalfa (or isn’t it alfalfa?) and little towns with silos, full of people who believe in the verbal accuracy of the Old Testament. The Middle West is so overpowering” (105).

During wartime, their letters often teem with recollections of past meetings (especially Forster’s letters). Next, they look at life very closely and describe the seemingly unimportant details, scraps of neighbourly conversations. This helps them stay mentally stable. They look at their respective realities with a magnifying glass – give accounts of visitors, their clothes and ways of talking, etc. What is more, in the war years correspondence, the references to food and friends gatherings come to the fore. This does not come as a surprise, considering the circumstances. But what is interesting, the ironic comments on the surrounding reality, humorous references – they prevail in their letters at variance with the horrifying war reality.

In Part 3, “The Postwar Years”, the focus shifts predominantly onto work (lectures, broadcasts, conferences, writing screenplays, writing stories, business trips) and health issues (mostly in reference to Forster). Besides, the writers devote much time to planning, arranging, and carrying out meetings, trying to make up for the war years. Their exchange is, as in the past, passionate and authentic. The playful style of the descriptions referring to the on-going life as well as the mock-seriousness applied towards themselves are still well accounted for in the letters. Quite naturally, with the deterioration of Forster’s condition, the letters become less frequent, but they still show the same emotional involvement as before.

Summing up, not only the introduction but also, to a large extent, the way the letters chosen by Zeikowitz are arranged make the book deeply engrossing. The reader remarkably quickly forgets that what s/he is reading is a very subjective selection of purposefully ordered actual letters and takes it for an epistolary novel. Paradoxically, such a reception adds greater realism (if this is feasible at all) to what is presented. In other words, the readers keep dismissing from their minds that what they are presented with is apparently

authentic—these are Forster and Isherwood, after all, who narrate the story, i.e. the tale of life-long friendship and unceasing hope for times when Maurice does not have to hide.

Richard Canning, 2009
Brief Lives: E. M. Forster
(London: Hesperus Press)

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Richard Canning's biography *Brief Lives: E. M. Forster*, published by Hesperus Press Limited, Et Remotissima Prope, in 2009, is the second of this type that came after *Brief Lives: Oscar Wilde* published in 2008. The biographer, a lecturer in English Literature at the University of Sheffield, is the editor of both gay male fiction and an AIDS fiction anthology, and is preparing a critical biography of Ronald Firbank.

The biography is different from other biographies due to its sources. It is a well-documented piece of writing, based on both less known materials from the King's College Library, and the Society of Authors, and well-known biographies, such as those by P. N. Furbank, Mary Lago and Oliver Stallybrass. It is divided into seven chapters, followed by an informative chronology, acknowledgements, and a useful bibliography. The biographer's goal is to make the reader understand the great writer's personality and reactions, emphasising the crucial issues of his lifetime that influenced him and his career. In spite of its limited number of pages (no more than 120), the book is quite difficult to follow, as the biographer guides the reader along many paths, which sometimes bounce back in time, offering further unexpected details.

The first chapter offers a detailed account of Forster's childhood dominated by female models around him, such as: his mother, Lily, born Whichelo (perhaps short from the French "Richelieu"), her sisters (Georgiana, Mary,