

Tim Leggatt, 2012.
Connecting with E. M. Forster. A Memoir
(London: Hesperus Press Limited)

Daniel Monk

University of London

One of the most effective qualities of this delightful book is its mosaic form. A self-proclaimed memoir rather than an academic treatise, it draws on and interweaves extracts from a rich variety of sources. Some of these will be familiar to scholars of Forster, such as his *Commonplace Book*, published in 1985, and *The Locked Diary* and his *Journal* for 1958, both published in 2011. But alongside these, there are original sources: the extensive correspondence between Forster and Leggatt, and the latter's contemporaneous journals and reflective memories. Combined, they paint a picture of Forster's last years from 1955. And while the book adopts a straight-forward chronological approach, with each of the fifteen years serving in effect as a chapter heading, the overall effect is far removed from the experience of reading a traditional biography. For without ever spelling it out, it demonstrates a compelling understanding of the inherent partialities and contingencies of knowing, remembering and connecting with another. Leggatt was a friend of Forster's and their relationship is at the heart of this book. But Leggatt is also a sociologist and a man of the theatre and while, to good effect, he wears his learning lightly here, this is a wise and considered memoir with a mastery of *mise-en-scène*. Consequently, it provides not only a rich and original addition to the every burgeoning literature about Forster, but also a particularly elegant example of the art of memoir.

Leggatt met Forster in 1956 when as a new undergraduate student at King's College, Cambridge, he became his new neighbour. Their relationship from its outset was very much one formed by that very particular milieu. For anyone interested in that environment there are rich pickings here. Contemporary students would no doubt baulk at the sharing of bathrooms; but little details like this paint a picture of a particular time and the physical conditions that helped create a type of physical intimacy. Forster's own accounts here

in his letters to Leggatt retain their gossipy freshness. His seeming fascination and ambivalence about Noel Annan (Provost of King's, 1956–1966) is a recurring theme. Alongside recording in his *Locked Diary* in 1963 that he “really is a shit” (104), in a letter to Leggatt in 1966 he notes that:

Noel, to write more privately, hasn't been a great success in my opinion. He was only interested in the clever [...] should do excellently in London and has spoken splendidly in the Lords about homosexuality.

This is the only reference to the issue of the decriminalisation of homosexuality – perhaps surprisingly, as the period covered coheres with the Wolfenden Report in 1957 and the enactment of the Sexual Offences Act 1967. But this is in some ways representative of the manner in which *Politics*, with a capital ‘P’, is present throughout the book. It is ever present and alluded to, but always through a personal lens. This is not a criticism, for by conveying how Great Events are a backcloth to and experienced through interior life, particularly when privileged enough to be one removed from their impact, provides a more visceral and effective window on to character.

The Cold War looms large over the period. Forster's engagement with it is captured here in a letter to Leggatt from 1959 in which he criticises Stephen Spender's public letter about the position of writers in the Soviet Union: “too diffuse and hovering between patronage and coaxing – the sort of wording the Soviets must be accustomed to receive from the west” (32). Forster's humanity mingles, characteristically, with a wry view of the heroism of others. His own public stands are in some ways more ambivalent. In a letter in 1960 about the infamous Lady Chatterley trial, in which he was a witness, he notes that: “I don't want this but it is one of those cases – they are not numerous – where one has to do one's duty”. And his political positions of the day appear increasingly to be informed by a sense of the past. From a letter from 1961 he announces to Leggatt the following:

I have furthermore to inform you of a political decision. Greatly though I dread and dislike both the US and the USSR, I feel disposed to support the former for the reason that it has experienced a nineteenth century (97).

The extent to which Forster's political stances are indeed 'dispositions' becomes increasingly clear in his letters. In 1960, he complains that, "Thanks partly to technical discoveries, all the things I care for are on the decline" (65). And the next year, berating King's for opening its doors, for a fee, to host a trade event, he writes that "I'm against commerce more than ever" (86). But his nostalgia is always coupled with reflection; in the same letter he acknowledges that his vehement distaste verges on snobbery and in another letter later that year that he does not know how to distinguish the commerce he loathes from "what I and others call legitimate enterprise". Indeed, while attentive to interiority, what is made abundantly clear from his letters to Leggatt is Forster's self-consciously shameless understanding of the importance of and pleasures to be gained from money. In 1956 he states happily that "I have become immensier rich since last week!" and in 1961 that, "my wealth is enormous" and that "Going onto the stage has done it!" (74). This last reference is a reminder to literary purists, critical of the impact of the lush film versions of his novels on Foster's legacy, that in his lifetime *A Passage to India*, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *Howards End* were all dramatised with his approval. It would be intriguing to know more about these past productions.

Forster's astuteness about money is of course very much part of his solid Edwardianism, and in some ways at odds with the idealised and romantic disavowal of the significance of materiality which emerged in the bohemianism in the period covered here. Yet it is perhaps precisely because of this honesty that Forster was able to effectively cross class in his friendships. And in some ways more than Leggatt, for in a telling reference Leggatt describes Billy Burrell as "a fisherman friend of Britten, in who boat he and Forster used to go out" (footnote 38). There is nothing incorrect here but it implicitly devalues the extent to which Burrell was a true friend of Forster's (and indeed one remembered in his Will).

A key theme running through the book that merges the political and the personal is race. For Leggatt travels to India and his experiences there in the late 1950s provide a window on to both changes and continuity with Forster's own informative experiences many years before. On the basis of testimonials from King's, Leggatt is appointed to a lectureship at Jadvpur University in Calcutta and the social clubs, shockingly, are still "whites only". Forster strongly advises him to meet Indians. Leggatt's later romantic attachment to an Indian woman and the social implications of this are discussed in their correspondence. In answer to Leggatt's question: "Do you

regard mixed marriages as doomed to great stresses and hurts?" (78), Forster replies that "Emotionally I am in full sympathy. Had it been possible for me I would certainly have married or tried to marry an Indian or Egyptian girl" (80, 1961). But when the relationship goes no further he calls it a "wise decision" (86). His rage against racism and cautiousness evidently entwined. A revealing comment in a letter from 1957 demonstrates his coupling of social conservatism and anti-imperialism, for he notes that:

I haven't myself any great quarrel with the Conservatives over home affairs. Sometimes they seem to me right. It's when they look abroad that they go wrong and are bound to do so—especially when they look at non-white people (16).

The correspondence provides particular insight into Forster's atheism, or, more precisely, his loathing of Christianity. Tellingly on this subject, there appears to be an absence of reflective self-awareness. For while in 1961 he writes to Leggatt that "I feel now little hostility to the C. of E" (77), his deep seated antagonism is a constant refrain that emerges in thinking about art, music, education, and, especially, death. But not, curiously, about sexuality.

Leggatt is not a homosexual and this fact is explicitly present in the development of their relationship. In an entry from his own journal in 1958 Leggatt notes that "I am to a small extent discomforted by the thought that Morgan's affection for me has its roots in homosexuality—however natural they may be" (26). Meanwhile Forster in his 1959 journal notes "T's unusual torso as he sprawled half-stripped close to be doing our accounts" (29). But there was no subterfuge about Forster's desire. In a letter from 1961 he writes that: "I am interested to learn that you are larger and browner, and if this increased my pleasure in looking at you shall indulge it further" (1961). Pondering their relationship later, Leggatt notes that he agreed with Jonathan Miller that "Morgan regarded me not as a possible sexual partner but as more akin to Fielding" (114). This is not the only place that Leggatt references characters in Forster's novels as a descriptive tool. In the context of asking Forster's advice about his entanglement with a married woman he writes in 1959 that "she is more like a domesticated Stephen Wonham than a Rickie; it is therefore in doubt as to what she'll decide to be claimed by" (61).

While it appears that Forster was open about his homosexuality to Leggatt, it is not clear to what extent Leggatt was or, more accurately perhaps, when

he became aware of, the nature of Forster's relationship with Bob Buckingham. The importance and centrality of the Buckingham family to Forster is clear. The tragic death of Bob and May's son in particular is the source of some of the most poignant of his writings included here. And when his own health failed, in a letter to Leggatt he writes in 1961 that:

I know that Bob and May were to my right and left [...] and liked touching them. Bob's little finger pressed mine and pursued it when it shifted. This I shall never forget (76).

But earlier in 1959, seeking advice about his own love triangle dilemma, he writes to Forster:

The events are catastrophic to all three of us. But like most catastrophes, I suppose they are quite normal. I suppose that most marriages that go somewhat wrong do so in this way. The fissure is made more apparent by a third party (1959).

This was a subject that Forster had first hand experience of but there is no record here that he drew on it to advise Leggatt.

In compiling this memoir, Leggatt is looking back on his youth, and he does so with candour. He does not seek to mask the peculiar tension between the apparent effortless privilege of an old Etonian Kingsman and the introspective self-consciousness of a thoughtful young man seeking something meaningful. His self-portrait is all the more effective and moving, told as it is through the prism of a relationship with an ageing man approaching and often reflecting on death. Without ever saying what this memoir in the final analysis leaves the reader with is a picture of two men at different stages of their lives connecting, developing, and sustaining a friendship and of Forster's understanding of and gift for playing the avuncular role.