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MAUGHAM, W. SOMERSET (1874–1965)

English novelist, short story writer, playwright, and essayist. A descendant of English barristers, W. Somerset Maugham was born in the British embassy in Paris. French was his mother tongue; he began to master English only when he was orphaned at the age of ten and sent to live with his uncle, Henry Maugham, a clergyman in the Church of England. Maugham had his first homosexual experience in 1890 with the aesthete John Ellingham Brooks, during a stay in Germany. But Maugham was and remained an Edwardian, who insisted on keeping up appearances. He refused to admit his homosexuality until the end of his life, and then only to a trusted few. Attempts to discuss the subject in any favorable way were sure to bring instant and permanent ostracism.

Not daring to tell his uncle that he had decided to become a writer, Maugham enrolled in medical school and produced his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*. He passed the next ten years in some desperation. He witnessed, with dismay, the trial of Oscar Wilde: like the Great Depression, the Wilde trial left its mark on an entire generation.

Maugham was contemplating a return to medicine when success struck. On October 26, 1907, Maugham's comedy "Lady Frederick" opened in London. The play was a smash hit; he soon had four plays running simultaneously, and began to grow rich. He abandoned the novel for the theatre, and spent the next two decades churning out product for this market.

During World War I Maugham served as a British spy in Russia—an experience which he used for his "Ashenden" stories. Just before his (unsuccessful) mis-

sion to Russia, Maugham had met and fallen in love with Gerald Haxton, a San Francisco youth of twenty-two who was serving in the same ambulance unit. It was an attraction of opposites: Haxton was a gregarious, extroverted, dashing scoundrel, while Maugham was shy and closeted. Maugham also had a daughter during the war, by Mrs. Syrie Wellcome, whom he married after she was divorced.

The marriage was not a success: Maugham spent most of his time abroad, traveling in exotic locales with Haxton, who not only supplied local boys for Maugham, but much of the raw material for his short stories. Maugham finally fled to his new villa, the famous "Mauresque," on the French Riviera, to take up life with Haxton. Mr. and Mrs. Maugham were divorced in 1928.

Maugham had returned to the novel in 1918 with *Of Human Bondage*. Others followed in succeeding years, as well as several collections of short stories. He had the knack of creating "properties" and was able to sell his work several times over—the short story could be turned into a play, which was then filmed and filmed again. The money flowed in and Maugham entertained the titled, the famous, and the intelligent at the Mauresque—as well as handsome young men, frequently procured for him by Haxton, who was rapidly slipping into alcoholism.

Between the wars, Maugham continued to turn out short stories, many of them about his travels in the Far East. He antagonized the entire British population of Malaya by staying as their honored guest, absorbing all the local gossip, and writing up the nastiest bits in flimsy disguise when he returned to Europe.

He spent much of World War II as a guest of the Doubledays in South Carolina. An estrangement between Maugham and Haxton was suddenly ended by Haxton's death in New York in 1944. For a moment, Maugham's treasured façade disappeared; he wept openly and bitterly at the funeral.

He returned to the Mauresque after the war and acquired a docile young man to replace Haxton: Alan Searle. The new man had the unpleasant chore of attending to the famous writer during his last twenty years, which were marred by paranoia and immense bitterness. He brooded particularly on his worth as an author; his wealth was obvious but his merit remained problematic. In the last years, Maugham fell victim to senile dementia, and would burst into obscenities during an otherwise friendly conversation. Many of the attacks were so severe that he had to be put to sleep with tranquilizers. He also made a bizarre attempt to disinherit his daughter and adopt Alan Searle as his son, an effort which was defeated by French law.

Maugham's place as a writer, the question which so obsessed him, is fairly secure. He is frequently referred to as a writer of the second rank, but also admitted to be of the very best second-raters. Throughout his working life, Maugham wrote for six hours in the morning, never rising without having completed at least a thousand words. Over a long career, he would have produced over ten million words of material; he was prolific through discipline.

His plays have mostly perished, although "The Circle" and "The Constant Wife" have been revived in the 1970s. Of his novels, at least four have shown staying power: *Of Human Bondage* (notable for its treatment of unrequited love, as well as its cruel portrait of his uncle Henry Maugham), *The Moon and Sixpence* (a thinly disguised fictionalization of Paul Gauguin's life), *Cakes and Ale* (Maugham's own favorite and perhaps his best, a fictionalization of the life of Thomas Hardy), and *The Razor's Edge* (a story of Eastern mysticism which strangely presaged the hippie movement of the 1960s and has been filmed several times). Maugham's short stories stand unchallenged—he made the world of the British colonials in the Far

East his own territory, and he had a definite genius for telling a tale.

Maugham's influence on homosexuality in our time has been at once non-existent and pervasive. Securely closeted, his literary work contains only a few passing mentions of the subject, from a very safe distance. Yet he was known to be homosexual, and discreetly entertained the international gay community at the Mauresque. Maugham set the style for many upper-class homosexuals of his time: they were to be Anglophile gentlemen, of urbane wit and a taste for modern art, with a strong bias toward the French as the second-most-preferred nation. They would not discuss such mundane matters as sex, using polished manners to protect their closeted existence. The pattern is certainly not extinct today.

Maugham summed up his own life bitterly in his famous remark to the effect that he had wasted his life pretending that he was three quarters heterosexual and one quarter homosexual, while the reality was the other way round.

After Somerset Maugham's death, his nephew Robin Maugham (1916–1981) recycled his "memoirs" of Uncle Willie into no less than three books. Robin, a lifelong alcoholic with a history of mental illness and sadomasochism, never had the intimate acquaintance he claimed with his celebrated uncle, and often retells stories heard from Barbara Back and Gerald Haxton. Some of these may be pure fantasy, such as the bizarre theory that Maugham sold his soul to Aleister Crowley in return for literary success. Robin pursued a literary career with little distinction (*The Servant* is still remembered today); his real energies were devoted to the bottle and to social climbing. A collection of dismal homosexual stories (*The Boy from Beirut*, San Francisco, 1982) did nothing to enhance his tarnished reputation.

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MCALMON, ROBERT (1896–1956)

American writer and publisher.

McAlmon was born in Clifton, Kansas, the son of an itinerant Presbyterian minister, the youngest of ten children. Of his mother (Bess Urquhart), he wrote: "Her love's my prison, / and my pity is the lock." The family migrated through a number of South Dakota towns into Minneapolis and eventually California. McAlmon attended the universities of Minnesota (1916) and Southern California (1917–20), but he received more education as a Western farmhand, as a merchant mariner, and in the Army Air Force, where he was stationed at San Diego in 1918. The airmen inspired his first poems published in college and in *Poetry* (March 1919).

In 1920, McAlmon moved first to Chicago and then to New York City in search of freedom and companions. In New York he worked nude as a male model and formed a life-long friendship with artist and poet Marsden Hartley. With William Carlos Williams, McAlmon founded *Contact*, which in its short life published Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), Kay Boyle, and Hartley.

On February 14, 1921, McAlmon married Bryher (Winifred Ellerman), heiress to a vast English fortune and H. D.'s lover. Their arrangement—"legal only, unromantic, and strictly an agreement," McAlmon wrote—served both Bryher, who received control of her inheritance, and McAlmon, who gained financial independence. (They were amicably divorced in 1927.) After a short stay in London, McAlmon made Paris his base where his Contact Press published (with Three Mountains Press) a group of then-unpublishable authors: Bryher, Mina Loy, Ernest Hemingway, Marsden Hartley, William Carlos

Williams, Ford Madox Ford, Ezra Pound, Mary Butts, Gertrude Stein, H. D., Djuna Barnes, and Saikaku Ihara [*Quaint Tales of Samurais*].

In their magazine Williams and McAlmon had called for an "essential contact between words and the locality." In his own fiction, McAlmon achieved that goal. His own Contact Press issued his first volumes: *A Hasty Bunch* (1922), *A Companion Volume* (1923), *Post-Adolescence* (1923), *Village: As It Happened through a Fifteen Year Period* (1924), *Distinguished Air (Grim Fairy Tales)* (1925); while Black Sun Press published *The Indefinite Huntress and Other Stories* (Paris, 1932). In his portraits of Dakota farm life, Greenwich Village parties, and gay Berlin, McAlmon wrote it down just as it happened, but he did not then find and has not now found a wide audience. His four volumes of poetry found a wider range of publishers: *Explorations* (London: Egoist Press, 1921), *The Portrait of a Generation* (Paris: Contact, 1926), *North America, Continent of Conjecture* (Paris: Contact, 1929), *Not Alone Lost* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1937). But his only book to find wide circulation has been his memoir of the twenties: *Being Geniuses Together* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938). And even it has been somewhat diluted with interleaved chapters by Kay Boyle in the later (New York: Doubleday, 1968; San Francisco: North Point, 1984) editions.

McAlmon became a drinking buddy with both James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway. When a prude destroyed the only copy of the concluding erotic soliloquy in *Ulysses*, McAlmon reconstructed the text from Joyce's notes, improvising as he went along. Hemingway's relationship with McAlmon was rockier. McAlmon took him to his first bullfight and published his first two books, but Hemingway was upset by McAlmon's homosexuality. McAlmon teased Hemingway for his friendship with F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose cock Hemingway examined at a urinal. Both James Joyce and Ezra Pound declared