

E. M. Forster's Last Love

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E.M.Forster and Mattei Radev, Long Crichel House, 1960's; courtesy of Mr Norman Coates

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E. M. Forster believed all his life that “the true history of the human race is the history of human affection” (Moffat 2010, 320) and he maintained a utopian faith in the possibilities of human love. So an understanding of Forster’s own love-life bears upon his literary output, as Wendy Moffat forcibly argued in her

ground-breaking 2010 biography *E. M. Forster: A New Life*. That book investigated Forster's gay life and sexual acts and – following Forster himself – recognized the sexual force as the wellspring of his creative work. However, Moffat passes over Forster's remarkable last romance with Mattei Radev, which dominated his final ten years in four sentences.¹

Forster was sixteen when Oscar Wilde was put on trial, eighty-eight when homosexual acts in private were finally decriminalised. He had finished drafting his sole gay novel *Maurice* in 1914, but this was not published until 1971, one year after he had died. In 1963 he noted: "...when I am nearly 85 how *annoyed* [underlined] I am with Society for wasting my time by making homosexuality criminal. The subterfuges, the self-consciousness that might have been avoided" (Heath 2008, 216). He blamed homophobia for his lack of productivity after *A Passage to India* in 1924.

This makes for a simplified history, and there may be additional reasons why his great talents stayed fallow for nearly half a century. Simon Raven, writing just after his death, described him unkindly as "bone idle" (Beauman 1993, 366). He certainly found it hard to contemplate the modern world, abjuring or disliking the telephone, and railing against "modern" inventions such as the bicycle.... *Howards End* (1910) attacked the new century as the "civilisation of luggage".

Moffat strangely refers to *Maurice* as Forster's "only truly honest novel". But *Maurice*, while fascinating in its own right, is also by far his worst. It has neither memorable characters nor plot; and – had homosexuality been de-criminalised seventy years earlier – the prospect of further novels following *Maurice's* template is a mixed one.

Colm Toibin offers similar cautions. He explores in his own wonderful fiction the psyches of two magisterial gay novelists – Henry James and Thomas Mann – avoiding reductiveness and celebrating complexity. "[Forster's] true nature" argues Toibin, was not only homosexual, "it was also wounded, mysterious and filled with sympathy for others, including foreigners and women. Despite his best intentions, he allowed all of himself into the five novels published in his lifetime, and only part of himself into *Maurice*" (Toibin 2010). And perhaps there is a connection between *Maurice's* badness and its "honesty" because novels should not be honest. "They are a pack of lies that are also a set of metaphors... but they

1 Radev's surviving partner Norman Coates believes that he offered Moffat the opportunity to read Forster's letters to Mattei and Eardley Knollys too late. He welcomes the present chance for his lover's place in Forster's story to be better known.

are not forms of self-expression, or true confession". Toibin, nonetheless, finds Forster's interesting love-life a subject worthy of research.

Forster – known to friends as Morgan – had a history of falling in love with dark-skinned outsiders, most famously Mohammed el Adl, a tram conductor in Alexandria, during WW1. During the last decade of his life, he fell in love with a new foreigner. When he met Mattei early in 1960 at Long Crichel House, he was instantly smitten. Mattei Radev was Bulgarian, dark, handsome and intelligent. He was also intensely private, modest and self-contained, tough and loveable. He had many admirers. Frances Partridge recorded that he was "extremely cosy and sympathetic...singularly detached from the cares of the world yet wise in his judgements". She also notes his gentleness, his consideration and acuity, his lack of general knowledge, his quick wit and occasional quick temper.²

Forster at once fabricated an excuse to pursue Mattei – writing on March 2nd to ask whether a fountain-pen returned to him really belonged to Mattei. Evidently fascinated in his turn, Mattei travelled to visit him in Cambridge only a fortnight later. What made Radev respond and visit so swiftly? Both were outsiders, an affinity they recognised and acknowledged. At a difficult point in their relationship Morgan made a diary note reminding himself that he "had to remember [he] was an outsider who had been treated with courtesy" in Mattei's world, an old man associating with someone nearly half a century younger.³

True, he was a GOM of English letters, much loved, much travelled, famous, wealthy but a feeling of "not belonging" was life-long. An only child whose father died when he was one, he described himself as "the outsidest of outsiders" (Moffat 2010, 291) and suffered from such paralyzing shyness that he feared he might never consummate a sexual relationship, only doing so when he was 37. He remained outwardly celibate, living quietly with his stifling mother until she died in 1945, when he was 66. He favoured in his essay "What I believe" a view of the artist as out of favour and out of power. He was proud that he had achieved closeness with ordinary people and that none of his intimates had been eminent. His two published biographies were both of relative nonentities. At King's College where he had lived since 1946 he wrote

2 *Good Company* 1967-1970 *passim*. In 1962 she recorded, "Eardley's friend Matti Radev was there, an enigmatic but handsome Bulgarian with thick cream-coloured skin and a black shock of hair over the trapezium of his forehead." (Partridge, 1990. 107)

3 Jan 14 and 29, 1966.

to Mattei that the company was “small, aged, loquacious and boring”⁴ Forster was aged, gay, lonely and lacking a partner.

Mattei too was – on many unrelated counts – another outsider. A Bulgarian stigmatised for his Macedonian origins, his shop-keeper family were branded class-enemies by the new Communist government after 1946 and their property confiscated. One cousin was imprisoned for criticising the Party, another was shot. Mattei managed to escape across the border into Turkey, where he subsisted for three months until bribing a boatman to row him out to a British cargo vessel. The idea of England, though he then knew little about it, attracted him. He hid for four days within a life-boat, surviving on lemons, a little bread and chocolate, finally working his passage to Glasgow. After detention in Barlinnie prison, he lived in an Orwellian house for the destitute in London with over 1000 rooms, working as an orderly in Whittington Hospital. He was before long diagnosed himself with TB and – unsure whether he would survive – spent more than a year in a Surrey sanatorium. His family were penalised for his defection, his start in life traumatic.

At the Whittington he had caught the eye of eye specialist and gay rights campaigner Pat Trevor-Roper, who helped find him lodgings in the attic of a Nash terrace mansion in Regents Park. At a party there in 1957, Mattei met novelist and music critic Eddy Sackville-West and Eardley Knollys, who had run an important gallery and now worked for the National Trust. These two – together with Desmond Shaw-Taylor, another music critic and the leading literary and art critic Raymond Mortimer – owned Long Cichel House in East Dorset, dubbed “England’s last literary salon”, and frequented as such by – among others – the Sitwells, Duncan Grant, James Lees-Milne, Rosamond Lehmann, Rose Macaulay and Elizabeth Bowen. Frances Partridge called Cichel this “headquarters of homosexuality” (Partridge 1993, 93). Eardley Knollys fell head over heels in love with Mattei and in 1959 helped him financially to buy a house on Ogle St., W1., thus setting him up as a picture-framer. He was notably successful, eventually employing sixteen assistants, framing pictures for the Queen’s Gallery and refusing a royal warrant in case this discouraged clients of modest means.

At some point, as Mattei’s surviving partner the theatre designer Norman Coates remembers, Morgan touched Mattei profoundly by saying “You and I are both outsiders”. Although they made the occasional trip together – for example

4 Undated card. While the Reform Club was, he apologised to Mattei, “rather dreary” and trivial: his friend Raymond Mortimer had petulantly resigned because he didn’t like the new carpet.

to see Ely Cathedral – on July 21, 1962, Morgan wrote to Mattei, “You are right – it is a sin to waste time, and I wish I wasted less. I don’t think though that one wastes time *sitting for a little together quietly which you and I sometimes do*” [my emphasis]. Walter Benjamin somewhere says that to love someone means to apprehend their inner emptiness: Forster and Mattei respected this in each other.

Mattei repaid Knollys’s generosity in setting him up in Ogle St. by buying a hunting lodge in 1966 near Petersfield known as The Slade. Here Knollys and Mattei could entertain at weekends, garden and play Canasta together. Eardley’s love for Mattei, following a brief physical relationship, was platonic and – on the whole – un-possessive.⁵ A dozen peaceable letters from Forster to Eardley suggest that Forster’s intense relationship with Mattei caused no undue disturbance.

Mattei’s reserve was legendary, and made him doubly attractive as a screen for the projections of others. He enjoyed learning about the mysterious rules of English life and the class system. He preferred listening to talking about himself. In some ways he was old-fashioned. When Tracey Emin’s *The Bed* was exhibited he deplored its astonishing self-indulgence, self-pity and vacuity, its defiance of the rules of discretion. But Mattei also carried within himself much unresolved pain and tension. It made him famously unreliable, forgetful and able to cut himself off.

Forster too was pathologically circumspect. Most of the hundred or so surviving letters and cards that he wrote to Mattei are brief and factual, concerning arrangements for meetings, his hand-writing remarkably firm and legible for a man in his 80’s. Their relationship ripened during 1962, a time during which they grew demonstrably closer. In late April⁶ – after Morgan had twice gone to see the film of *A Taste of Honey*, thinking the film much better than the original play – “I enjoyed every moment of your visit. Sometimes I wished I was your age but generally I was quite content to be my own age” while on 14 May occurred an unspecified and rapturous development between them that invites further speculation. “I expect to tell no one what happened on Saturday’ Forster recorded. ‘One of its results is to soften the tragedy of Rob [Buckingham] and [to] rest me.” This needs unpacking.

Forster had found love in 1930 with a kindly policeman called Bob Buckingham. Bob would within a few years lead a respectable life with his wife May and

5 Norman Coates to me Feb. 25, 2023: “Was Eardley jealous [of Forster]? A little bit, probably, and if so he would have behaved sensibly (he was sensible) and as result their friendship remained and lasted”. For another view see Fenwick 2021 [*Crichel Boys*] ch 12.

6 Forster mentions Easter, which fell on April 22.

their son Robin, while continuing occasionally to trust loyally with Forster. Robin, who was 29, had been diagnosed the previous year with Hodgkins Disease and would die that September 8th.⁷ Forster – Robin’s godfather – would sit side-by-side with him, their hands touching; and he had grown used to starting out of sleep with the full horror of Robin’s fate on his mind

The joyous development with Mattei on May 14 alleviated his grief, anxiety and distress. It lightened Forster’s mood. “My concentration and steady sympathy have stopped and I have been enjoying my own sensations again, as in earlier years, and losing my sense of responsibility. A nice change.” Here is a remarkable testimony to the power and centrality of Mattei in his life. He advises Mattei to hang onto a scarf of Morgan’s “Don’t post the little scarf – it is of no importance. Keep it until we meet – or better still keep it altogether in memory of our happiness together.”

Two weeks later and one day after attending the world premiere of Britten’s *War Requiem* in Coventry Cathedral [May 30], Forster proposes that “Next time we meet we must talk more. You said you wanted to know more about me, and I shall be pleased if you asked me. I want to know more about you, especially about your early life and home”. Mattei’s company made him happy. And three further years into their affair, in August 1965, Morgan echoes: “how happy Mattei and I were today and yesterday...I have been sheltered for the moment by Mattei and feel gratitude but not to the Christian or any God.”

Communication could, however, be unreliable. Forster absent-mindedly puts W 11 instead of W1 on one letter, which consequently never arrives; he mislays another while drafting it. Then Mattei loses a letter from Morgan beneath a table leg. And Mattei’s notorious elusiveness caused Morgan frustration and disappointment. “Will you be able to come on April 10? You can only come to Cambridge on a weekend, so if you are always engaged on a weekend you can never come to Cambridge. Please consider the above... I often think of you and know that you think of me, So do come along”. (March 1 no year but 1963?) “You are not free to come to Cambridge for a whole month. ‘not very good reading’”; however, “Lamentations are useless and perhaps undignified” (March 10, no year).

Forster warns himself against pleading or issuing rebukes, but is often overcome by his own feelings. Lamentations abound...“I write - no answer. I ring - no answer (still worse for I rang from London, where we might have met). I

7 ‘Love does a great deal to cancel what seems unbearable’ Forster had promised Bob Buckingham when Rob was still a child (July 19, 1939) Moffat 2010. 312.

write again to say: Can you come to stay here Saturday 20th? I so want to see you. Do write" (2/11/65). "Please write again and give me the first date at which you will be free to stay a night here. We cant go on thus for ever" (July 12 no year). When he invited Mattei to stay with him in Coventry at May Buckingham's suggestion, Mattei neither answered nor came, "which has not pleased this house", he informs Mattei pompously (4/26/67).

As for Mattei's letters, Forster destroyed most, safeguarding only two. During 1965 Mattei was hospitalised: Morgan feared a recurrence of TB. He wrote on June 24, "My dear Mattei What shattering news - I shall try not to worry about you since you ask me not do so but it is hard not to do so when I had looked forward to being with you, if only for a day". Mattei soon reassured him that his stomach bleeding was merely an allergic reaction to aspirin.

Mattei's second letter ran as follows:

I was looking at a tree today and noticed that the stronger branches were supporting the weaker and these in their turn were giving strength to others still weaker. The same as a stronger rock would support a lighter one. Then I thought that in the unanimated world this must be a law [*sic*: he means law] - The stronger supporting the weaker as in the animated world the opposite is true. - The bigger animals destroy the smaller ones, stronger nations subordinating weaker ones; then I thought that the very same tree would not allow another smaller one to grow nearby; and that religions teach people of mercy, goodness = charity and so on - defying some of the laws of nature! Then I got confused and must stop. How are you?

Onto this Forster wrote "Keep" and started his droll reply on March 25, 1965: "that is a very nice letter, except for the sentence in it which you missed out. The sentence in question is "I am coming on April 10. Do you think you could take up your pen and write it now ?..."

After this schoolmasterish overture, Forster addresses Mattei's hunger to reconcile the "survival of the fittest" with a spiritual imperative.

I agree pretty well with the rest of the letter, anyhow with its conclusion. I think, with you, that most of the universe, inanimate or animate, believes in force, and in the stronger attacking the weaker.

But either through religion or through some other agency, the human race is a partial exception to this, and believes in mercy and gentleness and in helping the weak. A partial exception - it does not go far enough, still it goes a little way, and that is why I prefer the human race to other entities known to me. I cannot pretend that I myself am in any special need of mercy and helpfulness at the present moment, still 'Can you come on April 10th and stay with Morgan? Take up your pen and reply, dear Mattei.

One might infer a subtext: that who is the stronger between them is a moot point. At best it was – despite the half-century between them – a relationship of equals. Forster had fame and longevity, Mattei relative youth and beauty. But each might also be said to be attesting, in his own way, to the importance of love in human affairs. Love is after all another name for the mysterious force that can transcend power.

Early in 1966 came an unexplained break, heralded by Forster's private musings about Mattei's bad behaviour: "I have just realised that M. has let me down" and "M has certainly behaved worse than I would have expected"⁸ (Jan 14 and 29 1966) as also by Forster's stiff rebuke "A line to thank you for your Christmas letter- though why do you miss 'Love' in it? I thought that was established between us..." (Jan. 2, 1966). When hurt Forster was capable of withdrawing, foregoing the chance of a meeting, or retreating into *froideur*. A sulk followed, with Morgan signing off formally "yours ever" or "best wishes". Norman Coates, Mattei's partner from 1973 until his death in 2009, speculates that Mattei might have caused offence by visiting Cambridge without seeing or telling Morgan: a letter from Forster to Eardley on Feb. 11, 1965 makes clear that the latter occasionally visited Dadie Rylands in Cambridge, and it is conceivable Mattei accompanied him. If so the curt card he wrote on March 7, 1966 conceals a desire to wound: "Look in on me *if you are in Cambridge again and have the time.* – M" [my emphasis].

Forster's most famous novel ends with the frustration of the desire of the English Fielding and the Indian Aziz for friendship: "No, not yet...no, not there". Echoing these fictional counterparts, Morgan and Mattei were also divided by race, class and age (48 years). But by summer Forster had stopped signing off

8 It is this contretemps that triggers Forster's Jan 1966 reflection noted earlier, "I have to remember I am an outsider who has been treated with courtesy."

frostily “best wishes” or “yours ever” when the valediction “Love from Morgan” resumes. Affection between them prevailed until Forster’s death in 1970.

Although fearful of coming out publicly as gay, Forster is refreshingly straightforward in his diary about experiencing sexual impulses. On August 18, 1965 he vouchsafes “I should like to record that during nearly 70 years I have been interested in lustful thoughts, writing and sometimes actions, and do not believe they have done me or anyone any harm” (Gardner 2011, 168). Despite two operations for prostate problems in the 1950s, he was still sexually potent into his 80’s and capable of orgasm, while implying that this had to be self-induced.

Were Mattei and Morgan’s relations platonic? Mattei admitted to Norman Coates that he and Morgan “cuddled”. And it is tempting to read the following as an admission of the role sex played in their friendship: “I should have been a more famous writer if I had written or rather published more, but sex has prevented the latter. Here Mattei must be recorded and honoured. The 3 or 4 years I have known him have seen steady advance. Had I known him earlier I might have claimed too much” (Gardner 2011, 163). It is clear that he *taught* Forster something about Forster’s own sexuality, for example during the joyous interlude chronicled in May 1962. And recording and honouring would mean expressing gratitude and indebtedness for posterity. A loose-leaf note reading April 5/6 [no year] “Mattei brought courage and clarity” endorses this view.

Forster famously recorded his interest in sexual politics: “I want to love a strong young man of the lower classes and be loved by him and even hurt by him. That is my ticket, and then I have wanted to write respectable novels” (Heath 2008, 216).⁹ Whether Mattei offered any form of “kindly discipline” we are unlikely now to learn. There are four different missives in which Forster refers to a walking stick, which gets lost and needs replacing. One reads: “Can you come Saturday August 31 [1963]? When you come, you may have to give me another stick. But about that we shall see. I do hope you will come [underlined] at all events. Your loving and *underlining* Morgan”. If it is tempting to read this as sexually suggestive, it may be wrong-headed. Mattei and Eardley shopped at the famous stick and umbrella shop – *James Smith and Sons* – on Gower Street.¹⁰ And Forster’s frequent pleas to Mattei are often reminders to him simply to turn up.

9 This sentence comes towards the conclusion of Forster’s so-called ‘Sex Diary’. See also Moffat 2010, 316.

10 Norman Coates points out that a walking stick is not something that you would beat someone with, it would be a cane.

On Thursday July 9, 1964, E. M. Forster dined at the Reform Club with his much younger guest, who brought distressing news. Some days earlier, Mattei had been arrested in a public lavatory for soliciting. After being beaten up in the car on the way to the police station, he was refused access to a doctor and now awaited the court case on the 21st of the month with trepidation (Gardner 2011, 249 n. 995). He asked Forster to speak for his character in court. Forster did not think he risked much by doing so being – at the age of 85 – uncompromisable. Moreover Mattei’s gaiety and courtesy in the face of his misfortune impressed him deeply.

He was distressed both by Mattei’s ill luck and a little by his own. The discovery that the police in the UK “are as filthy here as anywhere” appalled them both. Each nursed an optimistic vision of innate English decency that was profoundly wounded by this “disaster” as Morgan termed it. He found it nearly impossible to concentrate. Playing Verdi’s *Don Carlos* on his gramophone helped, but he feared that the civilised world was “ready to explode”. On July 22, Mattei cabled Morgan a precis of the court hearing. Although Mattei incurred only a relatively small fine,¹¹ his sentencing made Forster feel physically sick. “What a cess-pool we are all living in....” On August 1, Mattei came to stay with him in his rooms at Kings College Cambridge and Morgan promised to give him a restful time. “I shall talk or not talk about the loathsome incident exactly as he wishes” Morgan told Eardley. He would contact theatre director Dadie Rylands who like Morgan had rooms in Kings if Mattei liked but no one else. In the event Forster found Mattei “so dignified and good”. He wasn’t looking very well, but he ate and slept all right, and – in his distraction – forgot his shaving-kit in Morgan’s rooms.

Morgan brooded for weeks. That October he would write to Mattei – “the whole thing was quite unspeakable, I feel sort of dazed when I think of it now – one doesn’t realise, anyhow in my comfortable life, that there is such a thing as real active evil. You have anyhow found out, if you did not know it already, how fond some of your friends are of you. That is the compensating good”.

Mattei was instinctively polite, to the point of inscrutability. On August 27, Forster wrote hoping he was all right, noting how “difficult it is to be sure of people when they are so considerate of the feelings of others”. Staying with

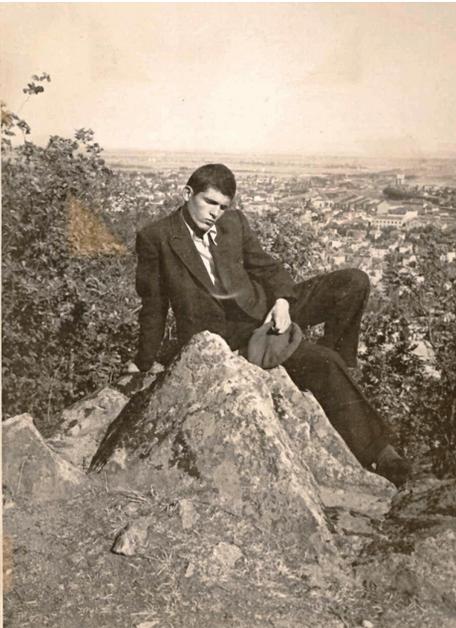
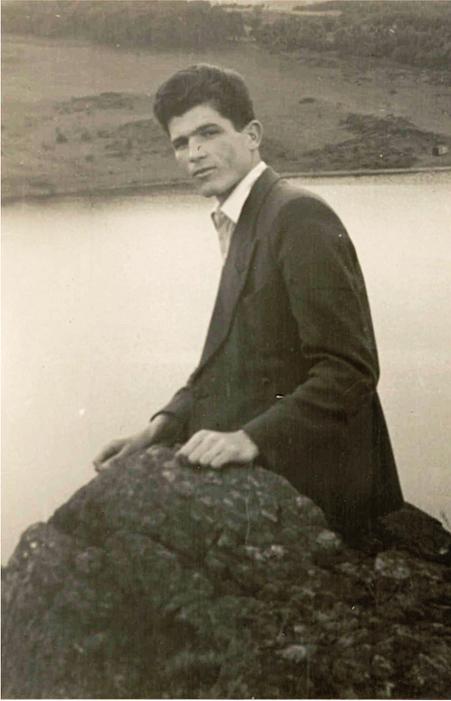
¹¹ Moffat says the charges “evaporated” and that Mattei paid only a small fine. If charges were dismissed, it is not clear why he was liable to pay any fine, nor why Forster felt sick at his sentencing.

Benjamin Britten that month Morgan burst out against the police occasionally, but “unattached of course to names or districts”. He never implicated Mattei in his invective.

This care for Mattei's privacy, even with close gay friends such as Britten and Pears, is noteworthy. It bespeaks the culture of fear, secrecy and paranoia before decriminalisation in 1967, when many gay men lived with paralysing anxiety, and suicide was common. When writer and editor William Plomer was arrested for soliciting a soldier near Paddington Station, he feared not merely for his job and liberty but for his friends, burning letters from Joe Acklerley, Stephen Spender, Isherwood and John Lehmann and any from E. M. Forster that hinted at homosexuality (Moffat 2010, 250). But Mattei, while hyper-discreet, also belonged to a more confident younger generation, less easily cowed or brow-beaten.

One coda to Mattei's story would surely have given Forster pleasure. His novel *Howards End* ends with a certain wry optimism about who is to inherit the house that clearly symbolises England itself. Helen's child – illegitimate and outside the class system – is the unexpected heir. Similarly in *The Longest Journey* Stephen Wonham, also illegitimate and a yeoman to boot, “believed he guided the future of our race and that century after century his thoughts and his passions would triumph in England”. In both novels the future of England and Englishness belongs in the end to the illegitimate outsider.

Unlike Forster's vision of a future yeoman England, Mattei's ideal was patrician and bohemian. When Eardley Knollys died in 1991 Mattei wrote “I think of Eardley every day. He was England for me”; and he soon received a telephone call from Knole House, the Sackville-West's ancestral home, to say that Eddy Sackville-West's paintings had been left to Knollys who in turn had bequeathed them, (together with his own collection) to Mattei. When would he like to bring a van to Knole to collect them? Mattei owned by the end of his life around 500 pictures including works on paper, and also 422 erotic drawings by Duncan Grant. The artists include – among others – Braque, Vanessa Bell, Modigliani, Gaudier-Brzeska, Graham Sutherland, Henry Lamb, Picasso, Pissarro, Ben Nicholson. A small selection of around 55 paintings, known as the Radev Collection, travelled around UK galleries in 2011. Thus, did Mattei the peasant-outsider from Bulgaria acquire one of the finest and most valuable private collections of art in England and, after the death of Frances Partridge in 2004, became Bloomsbury's last heir.



Mattei Radev, all late 1940's; courtesy of Mr Norman Coates

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