

# **Re-Orientating E.M. Forster: Texts, Contexts, Receptions. The Cambridge Forster Conference 2020**

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The onset of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic in the early months of 2020 caused the cancellation of many major academic events, including the conference planned to commemorate the half-centenary of E.M. Forster's death on 7 June 1970. This conference, which had been more than five years in the planning, was to have been held at King's College and the Faculty of English at the University of Cambridge from Thursday 2 to Saturday 4 April 2020. Eighty-two papers were to have been presented. At the end of February, it was still hoped that the conference would take place; within two weeks, however, it became absolutely clear that this could not happen, and speakers and others who had registered for the meeting were informed of its cancellation on Monday 16 March.

There can be no adequate substitute for a cancelled conference: discussions after papers, informal conversations, the immediate sense of engagement in a shared enterprise, and the making and remaking of connections in an atmosphere of bonhomie are irreplaceable factors. And yet even the outline of the programme for this conference may serve as a useful snapshot of the state of Forsterian studies fifty years after Forster. The names of speakers and the titles of their presentations are set out at the end of this contribution; some background and a brief analysis may be thought helpful.

The first informal enquiries about the scholarly appetite for a large-scale Forster event were made in late 2014 and early 2015, and met with considerable enthusiasm. Some initial ideas were presented at the conference on 'E.M. Forster's Legacy: "Only connect"

over a Century of British Arts' organized by Laurent Mellet and Elsa Cavalié and held at the Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès on 10–11 December 2015; the same meeting saw the foundation of the Association for Forsterian Research. Exploratory work, in particular involving discussions with King's College, Cambridge, Forster's *alma mater*, continued during 2016 and 2017. An advance notice about the event was circulated at the International E.M. Forster Society conference, 'E.M. Forster: Nature, Culture, Queer!', organized by Krzysztof Fordoński, Anna Kwiatkowska, and Heiko Zimmermann, and held at the Pädagogische Universität Ludwigsburg on 13–14 April 2018. Both the Association for Forsterian Research and the International E.M. Forster Society offered welcome support for the Cambridge event, and generously promoted it among their members.

In the same month, a conference Steering Committee was set up, with the following membership: Edward Allen (Christ's College, University of Cambridge); Howard Booth (University of Manchester); Santanu Das (King's College London; subsequently All Souls College, Oxford); Gemma Moss (Birmingham City University); Amber Regis (University of Sheffield); David Scourfield (Chair; Maynooth University); and David Trotter (University of Cambridge). The Committee was later augmented by the addition of Laura Davies (King's College, University of Cambridge). It was supported by a 25-member International Advisory Board, empanelled during the summer of 2018, and drawn from fourteen countries on five continents.

A call for papers was advertised in February 2019. It attracted widespread interest, with many more proposals being submitted than the Steering Committee could accept, given the space and time constraints of the conference. In addition to those who had proposals accepted for a twenty-minute paper or a short 'lightning talk', eight distinguished speakers accepted invitations to deliver keynote lectures or to participate in plenary panels.

The call for papers outlined the central aims and aspirations of the conference in these terms:

E.M. Forster, one of the major British writers of the twentieth century, died on 7 June 1970. The fiftieth anniversary of his death affords a special opportunity for a comprehensive re-evaluation of his place and significance in the literary and wider culture of Britain and beyond. This conference, to be held at the Cambridge University Faculty of English and King's College – where Forster was an undergraduate and where he later resided for many years as an Honorary Fellow – invites a wide-ranging exploration of his life and work, while focusing attention on two broad areas: (a) Forster in his

historical and cultural context; (b) receptions of Forster since 1970. A central aim is to facilitate a productive dialogue between these two perspectives, with a view to defamiliarizing dominant perceptions of Forster and his work, exposing what has been occluded, and identifying new directions of travel in Forster studies.

Forster's novels are widely read and have frequently been adapted for radio, television, and the cinema; he continues to be a major influence on other writers. *A Passage to India* remains a foundational text for postcolonial studies and Anglophone writing about India, while *Maurice*, first published in 1971, is a cornerstone of queer fiction. But how does the Forster that emerges in the artistic and scholarly production of the years since his death relate to the Forster of the years of literary creation? How far have contemporary receptions of Forster been shaped by our own cultural perspectives, agendas, and anxieties? To what extent and in what regards has E.M. Forster the man become E.M. Forster the myth? How might he be seen as a different writer from the one we think we know – perhaps one even more radical and unsettling?

In evaluating proposals, the organizers will pay careful regard to fulfilling the general aims and conception of the conference. Submissions are welcome on any topic.

The call for papers also explicitly invited reflection on

the relevance of Forster's *Weltanschauung* (itself inviting exploration and definition) to our own historical moment, with consideration of this question: What, fifty years after his death, has Forster's concern for 'connection' and for civil liberties to say to us at a time when narrow nationalisms and authoritarian ideologies have once again become prominent across the world?

In keeping with the commemorative and celebratory aspects of the conference, a number of events were planned outside the programme of papers. Chief among these was an exhibition of written and other materials from the substantial and important Forster collection in the King's College Archive Centre, curated by the Archivist, Patricia McGuire. Arrangements had also been made for conference registrants to view the suite of rooms where Forster had resided for many years as an Honorary Fellow of the College, as well as for a screening at the Cambridge Arts Cinema of the Merchant Ivory film adaptation of *Maurice* (1987) in its recent 4K digital restoration. For the wider public, a short course on Forster's best-known works ('Close Encounters of the Forsterian Kind'), taught by Edward Allen, had been programmed by the Cambridge

Institute of Continuing Education for April and May. Regrettably, none of these events could take place.

The conference was essentially self-funding, but generous support was extended by the following: King's College, Cambridge; the University of Cambridge Faculty of English; the University of Manchester; and the Modern Humanities Research Association, which awarded the conference one of its competitive Conference Grants for academic year 2019–20.

As the inclusion in the programme of a plenary panel on 'Global Forster' suggests, a broad international dimension to the conference was held to be of special importance. The fulfilment of this aspiration is reflected in the geographical spread of speakers. Of the 82 speakers listed below, the largest contingent (27) were affiliated to institutions in the United Kingdom (England and Scotland), with 13 from the United States, 8 from France, 6 from India, and 4 from Italy. The other countries represented were Australia, Canada, China (including Hong Kong), Germany, Greece, Ireland, Japan, Jordan, Kuwait, Poland, Romania, Sweden, and Turkey. The list also includes five independent, unaffiliated scholars. It was a particular pleasure for the organizers to be able to include in the programme at least two speakers who had participated in the celebrations associated with Forster's birth-centenary in 1979.

The papers accepted for the conference through the open call were grouped into two- or three-paper panels in order to fit comfortably and conveniently into the conference schedule. Two-paper panels were accorded sixty minutes, three-paper panels ninety minutes, with approximately twenty minutes allocated to each paper and ten to questions and discussion. Four panels were to be held in parallel in each session, with obviously undesirable clashes avoided as far as possible. In one of the 60-minute sessions, four 'lightning talks' were scheduled alongside three regular panels. The conference was to have opened and closed with the plenary panels, with discussion left until after all three 20-minute papers had been delivered, in order to allow the freest possible exchange of ideas. The two keynote lectures, each allocated approximately fifty minutes, were scheduled at prominent times on the first two days.

A small number of speakers had withdrawn, and been replaced by others on a reserve list, before the Covid-19 pandemic became an issue for the event. The list below represents the programme as at 1 March 2020, with the proposed dates and times of lectures and panels omitted. It was soon after that date that withdrawals related to the pandemic began, rapidly increasing in frequency thereafter.

The titles of the papers will speak for themselves,<sup>1</sup> but a few points may be highlighted here. All the finished novels appear by name on the list, with the exception of *The Longest Journey* (which is not, however, altogether forgotten), *A Passage to India* and *Maurice* most frequently; the short fiction is also well represented. Forster's essays, broadcasts, and the libretto to *Billy Budd* also make their appearance. Among his contemporary fellow-writers, Elizabeth Bowen and D.H. Lawrence are the most prominent (the Lawrence panel was indeed proposed as a unit). Forster's relationship with modernism comes under scrutiny, together with literary questions of a more traditional kind, and a focus on textual issues, reflecting a current tendency towards contextual studies.<sup>2</sup> A great deal of interest is shown in the reception of his work, not only in adaptations of the fiction for screen and stage but in novels shaped or deeply informed by it, as well as in translations into other languages. Thematically, there are the postcolonial and queer emphases anticipated in the call for papers, but additionally a wealth of topics across a wide range, some in tune with highly contemporary concerns (the nonhuman, ecocriticism), others looking back to (for example) Forster's educational formation in Classics or the philosophical contexts of his work. Politics (democracy, liberalism) features appropriately; at this time in history, it is striking that the titles of two papers include the word 'tolerance'.

All who were involved in the organization of this conference felt great frustration and indeed sadness at the necessity to cancel what had promised to be a memorable event. Many of the speakers, too, contacted the organizers to express their disappointment and regret at the cancellation. The persistence of Covid-19 throughout the world at the time of writing (September 2020), not to mention the complexity of organizing an event on this scale, means that it is unrealistic to contemplate a comparable conference in the near future, though it is hoped that smaller in-person events will prove possible. Meanwhile, we look forward, with Forster himself, to a Happier Year.

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<sup>1</sup> The titles listed are the confirmed titles provided by speakers on their conference registration forms, with minor editorial interventions for reasons of consistency only.

<sup>2</sup> A new Forster edition – The Cambridge Edition of the Fiction of E.M. Forster – has been commissioned, with Howard Booth as General Editor and several other conference speakers as editors of individual volumes.

## Re-Orientating E.M. Forster: Texts, Contexts, Receptions

### List of scheduled presentations

#### Keynote Lectures

Paul B. Armstrong, 'E.M. Forster's Ironic Liberalism and the Challenge of Our Time'

Leela Gandhi, 'Invisible, Inc.'

#### Plenary Panels

##### *Global Forster*

David Trotter, 'Becoming Global: Space and Place in Forster's Early Fiction'

Stefania Michelucci, 'Forster's Italian Places: An Anthropological Perspective'

Santanu Das, 'Let Egypt in India Melt: Forster's Translocal Libido'

##### *Forster as Critic and Public Intellectual*

Laura Marcus, 'Forster and the Character of "Character"'

Rachel Potter, 'The "Inner Mumble": Forster, International PEN, and Free Expression'

Stefan Collini, 'The Higher Feebleness: Forster as a Public Intellectual'

#### Panels (parallel sessions)

##### *Adaptations in other media I*

Mihaela Cel-Mare (Avram), '"Dear Pensione Bertolini": A Rhetoric of (In)fidelities in Lance Sieveking and Richard Cottrell's 1966 Stage Adaptation *A Room with a View*'

Alberto Fernández Carbajal, 'Hipsters End: Hegelian Property, Imitation vs. Authenticity, and Queer Time in Matthew Lopez's *The Inheritance*'

##### *Adaptations in other media II*

Monique Rooney, 'Only Mediate: The Mere Interest of "Interbrow" in *Howards End*, Novel and Television Mini-Series (1910; 2017)'

Claire Monk, '*Maurice* and its Adaptations across Media: From Forster's Palimpsest to Screen, Stage, Radio, and Beyond'

Jaya Yadav, '(De)canonization of E.M. Forster: Unveiling the Screen Adaptations of *Howards End* and *Maurice*'

***Alterities in the posthumously published short fiction***

Munejah Khan, 'Race, Sexuality, and the Empire: Analysing the Colonial Encounter in E.M. Forster's "The Life to Come" and "The Other Boat"'

Anastasia Logotheti, "'So far no other": Alterity in Forster's "The Other Boat"'

***Aspects of the nonhuman***

Nour Dakkak, 'Tolerance and the Nonhuman in E.M. Forster's Fiction'

Ming Panha, "'Part of your world": The Speculative Narratives of the Nonhuman as a Challenge against Tourism in "The Story of the Siren" (1920) by E.M. Forster'

Derek Ryan, '*A Passage to India* and E.M. Forster's "Unentomological" Aesthetics'

***Classical antiquity***

David Scourfield, 'Forster's Aeschylean Travesty'

Jennifer Ingleheart, 'Classical Education and Sexuality in the Fiction of E.M. Forster'

Nikolai Endres, 'Expurgating Martial: The Romosexuality of *Maurice*'

***Democracy***

Benjamin Wood, 'Reading E.M. Forster in the Culture Wars: Augustinian Politics and Protecting the Greenwood'

Laurent Mellet, "'Literature and democracy are natural allies" (BBC Talk, 11 February 1942): Forster's Liberal and Democratic Fiction'

Anasthasia Castelbou, 'Aspects of Sharing: Co-Existence and Tolerance in Forster's Fiction'

***Editing Forster***

Howard Booth, 'The Manuscripts of *Maurice*: What We Know for Sure, What We Can Infer, and What We Don't Know'

Gemma Moss, '*Where Angels Fear to Tread* and Modernist Editing: The Manuscript and Proofs'

Sujan Mondal, 'Annotations in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*'

***Egypt***

Richard Bruce Parkinson, "'Old things belonging to the nation": Forster, Ancient Egypt, and the Queer Museum'

Cedric Van Dijck, 'Forster and the Egyptian Revolution'

***Expanding the Forstersphere***

Evelyne Hanquart-Turner, 'E.M. Forster and Africa: Travelogue, Letters, and Essays'

Anna Fåhraeus, 'Hiding in Plain Sight: E.M. Forster and Perceptions of Moral Mystery in the American Media between the Wars'

Qiang Huang, "'Would it be too late to become interested in China?': E.M. Forster and China'

***Forster and D.H. Lawrence***

Hugh Stevens, 'Friendship and Panic: Homoerotic Desire in Lawrence and Forster'

Bethan Jones, '*Billy Budd*, "The Prussian Officer," and the Imperfect Politics of War'

Susan Reid, 'The Elephant in the Text: Sense, Sound, and Empire in E.M. Forster and D.H. Lawrence'

***Forster and Elizabeth Bowen***

Diana Hirst, "'Place-Feeling" in the Fiction of E.M. Forster and Elizabeth Bowen'

Helen Tyson, "'Oh to acquire culture!": Clerks and Culture in E.M. Forster and Elizabeth Bowen'

***Forster and the novel: techniques, critiques, theories***

John Attridge, 'E.M. Forster and the Ante-Disciplinary Theory of the Novel'

Stuart Christie, 'Surrounding Forster'

Anna Kwiatkowska, 'Framing Experience: The Cinematic in E.M. Forster's Narration'

***India: politics, language, power***

Harish Trivedi, 'Reading Forster in India – against Kipling: Hindus and Muslims, English and the "Vernaculars"'

Cynthia Drake, 'In Shining Royal Robes: The Ashokan Haunting of *A Passage to India*'

Marina Alonso Gómez, 'Language and Power in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*'

***Intertexts and influences***

Anna Enrichetta Soccio, 'Textuality and Intertextuality in *Howards End*'

Xavier Giudicelli, 'Romances of Boys Bathing: Word and Image Dynamics from Forster to Hollinghurst'

Richard A. Kaye, "'A Happier Year": E.M. Forster's *Maurice*, Christopher Isherwood, and the End of the Auden Generation's Art of Obliquity'



***Legacies***

Elsa Cavalié, “‘That something [...] was the spirit of English Prose’: E.M. Forster’s English Legacy’

N. Cyril Fischer, ‘To Whom Does Forster Beautifully Belong?’

***‘The Machine Stops’: Contexts and intertexts***

Jan Hollm, ‘Englishness and Ecotopian Discourse in E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops”’

Max Saunders, ‘Forster and the Future’

***Memory, perception, symbol***

Ria Banerjee, ‘Against Memory: Wartime and Postwar Remembrance in E.M. Forster’s Public and Private Writings’

Annika J. Lindskog, “‘Melted into a single mass’”: Sight vs. Sound in *A Passage to India*’

Tania Zulli, ‘E.M. Forster and Italo Calvino: The Language of “Exactitude” and “Multiplicity” in *A Passage to India*’

***(Meta)communications***

Chris Mourant, ‘Aspects of the Epistolary Novel: E.M. Forster and Letters’

Rosie Langridge, “‘Telegrams and anger’”: E.M. Forster’s Mediated Personal Relations’

Daniel Ryan Morse, ‘A Queer Archive: Re-Orientating Forster’s Broadcasts’

***Modernist perspectives***

Simonetta de Filippis, ‘From *The Lucy Novels* to *A Room with a View*: The Genesis of a Novel and the Progress of a Writer’

Julie Chevaux, “‘ Pictures are not easy to look at’”: Forster and (Modernist) Perspective’

David McAllister, ‘E.M. Forster’s Stereographic Modernism’

***Music***

Josh Torabi, ‘Wagner, Nietzsche, Forster: Music in *Howards End* and Beyond’

Tsung-Han Tsai, “‘Might the violin satisfy?’”: Music and the Sense of “Proportion” in “Dr Woolacott”’

***Pageants and places***

Parker T. Gordon, ‘Reclaiming the Pageant Ground: Forster’s Experiments with Tradition’

Catherine Lanone, “‘My wood’”: Forster’s Engagement with Ownership and Preservation’

***Philosophical contexts***

Thomas Newman, 'Neoplatonism in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*'

Jana Giles, "'Beyond the killing glare of truth": E.M. Forster Rewrites the Sublime'

Christina Root, 'The Disenchantment of the West: E.M. Forster and the Enlightenment Tradition'

***(Post)colonial discourses: Forster, Said, Bhabha***

Mohammad Shaheen, 'Orientalism Re-Orientated: Forster, A Case Study'

Afrinul Haque Khan, 'Articulating Difference and Desire, Negotiating Selfhood and Nationness: A Study of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*'

***Queer friendships, queer fiction***

Bárbara Gallego Larrarte, "'Young people keep me young": Intergenerational Friendships and E.M. Forster's Public Turn'

Nadine Tschacksch, '*Pray the gay away!* – Corruption and Disruption in E.M. Forster's Queer Fiction'

Simon Turner, 'Celebrating Ecstatic Death in "Dr Woolacott"'

***Space and identity***

Leonie Wanitzek, 'In Santa Croce with Lefebvre: Englishness and the Production of Touristic Social Spaces in Forster's Italy'

Rohit Chakraborty, 'Queers of Brit-India: Assimilation, Excision, and (Dis)orienting Homosexuality in E.M. Forster's *Maurice* and Neel Mukherjee's *Past Continuous*'

***Translating Forster***

Krzysztof Fordoński, 'From the English of E.M. Forster – An Overview of a Century of Forsterian Translations'

Heiko Zimmermann, '*Maurice* Goes Socialist: The First East German Publication of *Maurice*'

***Women***

Jane Goldman, 'Wonham – Am I That Name? E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Queer Women, and Catachresis'

Sania Iqbal Hashmi, "'Being invisible, they seemed dead already": Reading the Spectrality of Muslim Women in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*'

Meri Tek Demir, 'Female Voices: Aspects of Culture and Intellectualism in *Howards End* and *On Beauty*'

**Lightning Talks**

Terry Kidner, "Art Appreciation" as Character Code in *A Room with a View*'

Kate Haffey, 'Forster and Queer Friendship'

Eden Rea-Hedrick, 'Toward a Queer Humanism in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*'

Toshiyuki Nakamichi, 'Hindu Modernists' View of Hinduism Reflected in *A Passage to India*: "Caves" as the Symbol of the Universal Formless God, and "Temple" as Idolatry'