

***E.M. Forster. His Longest Journey*, documentary, DVD,  
November 2020. Produced and directed by Adrian  
Munsey & Vance Goodwin. Narrated by James Wilby**

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The year 2020 was to witness several events commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of E.M. Forster's death. Sadly, due to the pandemic, some of them (such as conferences and seminars) scheduled for this year had to be cancelled. However, the anniversary has not been forgotten or postponed altogether. One of the events which can be counted among those that addressed the anniversary celebrations was the release of a DVD with a documentary on Forster's life and his literary oeuvre.

*E.M. Forster. His Longest Journey*, produced and directed by Adrian Munsey and Vance Goodwin, is a 50-minute long feature which consists of the fragments of interviews with the people who share the enthusiasm for Forster and his works, and who therefore have written extensively about him, have researched his works, or have been involved in the production of film adaptations based on Forster's novels. The main contributors include Nicola Beauman, Bill Goldstein, James Ivory, Prof. Wendy Moffat, Prof. Max Saunders, and Prof. Santanu Das. Yet, apart from the contemporary voices, we can also hear fragments of archived conversations conducted a couple of decades ago.

The structure of the film is an exciting arrangement of facts from Forster's life, his ideas, as well as photographs of places and people dear to him. They all blend into an engrossing presentation of the writer's figure. Consequently, *E.M. Forster. His Longest Journey* reveals some glimpses of the life of the famous writer. Furthermore, in the

process, the film introduces the spirit of the times Forster lived and loved in – the journey the viewer is taken on begins in the Victorian epoch, into which Forster was born and within the values of which he was brought up, and continues through the Edwardian and interwar war years, up to the post war times. Eventually, the documentary takes us, to paraphrase the words of Forster, to “happier years,” namely to the times when the law regarding homosexuality in England changed (1967), *Maurice* is published (1971), and the novel is eventually also filmed (1987).

As for editing, the moment the documentary starts the viewer is quite abruptly introduced to Forster commenting on himself as a novelist and on the characters from his works. This creates the feeling that the viewer apparently missed the beginning proper on the one hand, yet on the other, such immediacy of the beginning draws our attention to the very words of the writer which soon turn out to be the leitmotif of the whole documentary. In the subsequent shots we encounter, be it in the course of the interviews or in the photographs, different people Forster was in one way or another emotionally attached to. They include also the literary figures whom he called “people” rather than fictional characters. Subsequently, the memories about Forster, his life, and his fiction presented via personal comments of his past friends and the present day Forsterians, are smoothly interwoven with brief scenes from his filmed novels. This peculiar cinematic patchwork brings to mind Forster’s “only connect” phrase, which at some point is also referred to by the speakers. The documentary, thus, reminds of a scrap-book of Forster’s life – the best, the most memorable, the most important bits – all in there, marked, noted, commented. However, such an array of different ideas, names, titles, issues might not be very clear to those who are novices when it comes to the life and work of Forster. For instance, only knowing the context of the writer’s life and literary output, one is capable of matching the faces in the photographs appearing on the screen with the names mentioned by the speakers. That is why some viewers may find the film confusing at places.

Another aspect of the film which is worth noting is the music by Adrian Munsey. It renders wonderfully the melancholy and the nostalgia discernible throughout the film, be it in the way the speakers recall their Forster-related experiences or through the insertion of black-and-white pictures. The music ultimately creates an unobtrusive but meaningful and thus indispensable background. In fact, it is so well selected that when the credits appear and the sound of music comes to the fore, the viewer can appreciate its connection with the theme fully. The shift of focus onto music at closing clearly alludes to the significance of this artistic sphere in Forster’s life. At least this is the case when the audience are aware about this passion of Forster. Otherwise, the film

hardly makes any reference to the writer's interests other than those related to his literary themes or his romantic/sexual fascinations. Perhaps only the piano with an open score visible in one or two photographs showing Forster's room may be an indication of his musical concerns.

Touching upon the themes, the story of his life and writing career is told generally via one of them, that is homosexuality. This seems to be done in order to underline the importance of this issue both in his life and in his works. While watching the film, one has the impression that Forster to some extent accepted the reality which was characterized by a complete lack of acceptance of homosexuality but in which, nevertheless, he had to live. And while hoping and waiting for better times to come and refraining from taking radical steps, Forster gave vent to his liberal thought in his numerous speeches, lectures, broadcasts, and essays or conversations with friends, and, above all, in his letters. Following his idol, Jane Austen, he would comment on and criticize the society in a graceful manner, frequently resorting to irony, his favourite weapon.

The documentary presents the life of Forster in a nutshell. It references his family background, liberalism, tolerance, friendships, and the hardships stemming from the 'confirmed bachelor' status. It vividly portrays Forster's struggles related to him coming to terms with his homosexuality and looking for his place within the hostile societal norms in which he was to live and eventually also to love. However, to those who are quite familiar with the life and work of Forster, this short documentary may seem slightly one-sided, centring merely on him being a novelist and a short-story author. Yet, the general impression is undeniably positive. The elements of the past (black and white photographs, the voice of Forster, the voices of his friends), the elements of the present (the interviews with the scholars, scenes from the adaptations realized after the death of Forster), and the artistic world (the comments of the actors, the works of art, the book covers, Cambridge architecture) amiably intermingle and create the feeling of an impressionistic picture. The individual parts of this picture remind of Chekhovian slices of life – glimpses that intrigue and ask for further investigation. Munsey and Goodwin present the viewer with a couple of scenes, photographs, quotations, as well as personal items like letters and manuscripts, or a fragment of a page of Forster's secret diary, teasingly leaving the rest outside the frames. This secrecy and the limited vision are echoed in the frequently used close-ups on the one hand and the bird's eye view shots on the other. Both ways of presenting veil a certain section of the presented material, inviting thus the viewers to learn more, to go beyond the frames and find out the details about the "slices" of Forster's life-long journey.

Last but not least, I personally found the final scene quite moving and artfully symbolic. It shows the figure of the elderly writer, with his back turned to the viewer, slowly but inevitably disappearing into the green. This metaphorical ending, within seconds, is capable of alluding to a number of issues; first, it makes one think of the title of the documentary, thus creating a compositional frame; second, it points to Forster's favourite novel (*The Longest Journey*); and third, it brings in the idea of Forsterian greenwood ("The Other Side of the Hedge," *Maurice*, *The Longest Journey*, to name but the most obvious texts referring to the idea), which in turn bring to mind the theme of homosexuality.

All in all, the documentary *E.M. Forster. His Longest Journey* manages in less than an hour to present the figure of Forster against a broader social and historical context. It allows the viewer to taste the spirit of the epoch the writer was familiar with, of the times long gone but preserved on the leaves of his narratives. Thus, although short, it offers quite a number of Forster related facts and, what is more, it is at the same time quite powerful in terms of suggesting emotions both of the writer and those who take, or once took, an active interest in his life.