

Book review: A Great Unrecorded History

EDGE, May 10, 2011

One hundred years ago, before we had Twitter and Facebook and ubiquitous email with which to badger each other with our every thought, people took the time to pen detailed diaries and chatty letters, spilling their guts and recording their thoughts, their feelings, their souls.

E. M. Forster, one of the greatest British authors of the previous century – who suppressed until after his death publication all of his works with homosexual themes – was a prolific letter writer, and also kept an elaborate set of diaries. Much of his writing from his earlier years he destroyed as 'unpublishable' during various waves of Victorian and post-Victorian intolerance and persecution. Thankfully, much has survived. **"A Great Unrecorded History"** draws on unpublished diaries and personal letters to give us an illuminating look into Forster's evolution as a writer and as a man.

Forester's works (such as "A Passage to India," "Maurice," "Howard's End") are strong on ironic nuance and internalized cultural and emotional conflicts. Those were the earmarks of his life as well. Repressing his sexual urges out of guilt and fear, never having sex with another person until he was 37 years old, he was a mama's boy who never really cut the apron strings. Although he lived for stretches of time in India, served in the Red Cross in Egypt during World War I, and kept private apartments for the occasional rendezvous, he always returned to the icy familiarity of his mother, Lily.

Wendy Moffat gives us a portrait of a writer driven by a quiet and subtle determination who seems to be living ever closed in by his fears, but finds the courage to survive and explore. In defiance of custom, he tentatively reaches out across race and class to find friends and lovers while engaging in lifelong correspondence with the likes of Christopher Isherwood, Virginia Woolf, and D.H. Lawrence. He crosses paths with Lawrence of Arabia, Edward Carpenter, H.G. Wells, and Lyton Strachey. Teaming late in his life to craft the opera "Billy Budd" with Benjamin Britten, he battles the composer's impulse to sanitize the project, working to keep its homoerotic soul.

Moffat also gives us a look into the gay underworld of Forster's time, which did its best to hide in plain sight, and examines his college decision to forsake religion. Forster described his philosophy in 1938 in an essay titled "What I Believe," as Europe was sinking into yet another World War.

"I do not believe in Belief," he wrote. "But this is an age of faith, and there are so many militant creeds that, in self-defence, one has to formulate a creed of one's own. Tolerance, good temper and sympathy are no longer enough in a world which is rent by religious and racial persecution, in a world where ignorance rules, and science, who ought to have ruled, plays the subservient pimp."