

## E. M. Forster: In My Library

E. M. Forster in his BBC talk on reading thought the book collecting that Keynes so enjoyed was non-adult. There was little unanimity in Bloomsbury in such matters. Forster's broadcast was one of a series on personal libraries that included a contribution by MacCarthy as well. Like Keynes's, Forster's talk was reduced to a single page in *The Listener* where it was published in July 1949. Forster restored the cuts when reprinting it in *Two Cheers for Democracy*. *Autobiography* is again part of the talk; the humour and tone of voice are very characteristic of Forster's writing.

You are soon in my library and soon out of it, for most of the books are contained in a single room. I keep some more of them in a bedroom and in a little sitting-room and in a bathroom cupboard, but most of them are in what we will politely term the library. This is a commodious apartment – twenty-four feet by eighteen – and a very pleasant one. The ceiling is high, the paint white, the wallpaper ribboned-white, and the sun, when it shines, does so through lofty windows of early Victorian Gothic. Even when it does not shine, the apartment remains warm and bright, for it faces south. Round the walls are a dozen wooden bookcases of various heights and shapes, a couple of them well designed, the others cheap. In the middle of the room stands a curious object: a bookcase which once belonged to my grandfather. It has in its front a little projecting shelf supported on two turned pillars of wood, and it has a highly polished back. Some say it is a converted bedstead. It stood in

a similar position in the middle of his study over a hundred years ago – he was a country clergyman. Bedstead or not, it is agreeable and original, and I have tried to fill it with volumes of gravity, appropriate to its past. Here are the theological works of Isaac Barrow, thirteen volumes, full morocco, stamped with college arms. Here are the works of John Milton, five volumes, similarly garbed. Here is Evelyn's *Diary* in full calf, and Arnold's *Thucydides*, and Tacitus and Homer. Here are my grandfather's own works, bearing titles such as *One Primal Language*, *The Apocalypse Its Own Interpreter* and *Mohammedanism Unveiled*.

Have you read my grandfather's works? No? Have I read them? No. My grandfather, then, is one of the influences that I can trace in my little collection. I never knew him in the flesh. He must have been rather alarming. His character was dogmatic and severe, and he would not approve of some of the company which I oblige him to keep today. For close by, in a bookcase between the two windows, lurk works of another sort – Anatole France, Marcel Proust, Heredia, André Gide – the type of Frenchman whose forerunners he denounced in a sermon preached to his village in 1871 on the occasion of the fall of Paris. It is ironical that the book belonging to him which I most cherish should be a French book. This is a great encyclopaedia in fifty-two volumes – the *Biographie Universelle* of 1825. Each volume bears his dignified bookplate with our family arms and also the bookplate of Sir James Mackintosh, its previous owner. It is in bad condition – all the backs off – but it is a useful work of reference of the leisurely type, and makes excellent reading. There is nothing slick about it. It dates from the days before the world broke up, and it is a good thing occasionally to go back to these days. They steady us.

The next influence I have to note is that of his daughter, my aunt. I inherited her possessions, and had to sell or give away most of her books before I could fit into my present quarters. But I kept what I liked best, and enough to remind me of her cultivated and attractive personality. She was a maiden lady of strong character, and a great reader, particularly of good prose. Trollope, Jane Austen, Charlotte Yonge, Malory, sound biographies of sound Victorians – these have come down from her. Books on birds also – Bewick and Morris. The birds remind me of her bookplate. She had a charming personal one of a foliated arabesque round a shield, and from the arabesque peep out birds, dogs and a squirrel – some of the living creatures who surrounded her country home where she led a quiet, happy and extremely useful life. She was interested in crafts – she started classes for leatherwork in the village. She was herself a designer and worker, she designed and executed book-covers which were made up at the binder's, and my shelves (to which we now