

Surrey in *A Room with a View*: A Candidate for Scholarly Mediation

Jason Finch, Åbo Akademi University

Like anyone else, E.M. Forster had his own sociocultural formation. More unusually, he wrote fiction which, both during his own lifetime and more recently, has interested readers from backgrounds widely different from his, and which has been found significant for its handling of universal themes. Not only that, but he is taken seriously even by critics who regard the notion of universal themes as mere ideological obfuscation. What makes his ability to engage such a broad range of commentators truly remarkable is that, even when, as in *A Passage to India*, his fictional setting is at its most exotic and his aspirations at their most universalist, so much of his central inspiration and material clearly derives from his own particular “world”—from the precise historical experience, concerns, values, places, and types of people to which he has become accustomed in his own life.

It is hardly far-fetched to see a similarity with Jane Austen. Not that Jane Austen ever set a story in India—or even in Italy. On the contrary, when her characters leave the shores of England they simply disappear from view. But both of them were writers whose fiction reflected a particular, perhaps rather narrow milieu, but who nevertheless came to be seen, by a very heterogeneous readership, as exceptionally significant and worthwhile.

But does a reader whose sociocultural formation is very different from Austen’s or Forster’s miss something? To some extent both Austen and Forster describe their stories’ settings quite explicitly, which is obviously helpful. An alert reader may also be able to make extrapolations from some of the details which do get registered, as a way of reconstructing larger constellations which do not. Trying to put two and two together to make four like this is something we all do in everyday life, in situations where we notice that our previous sociocultural understanding falls short of present needs. Sometimes, however, we fail to notice this, and quite simply do not realize that there is something we are not picking up on. Such un-self-conscious failures of understanding may also beset readers of Austen and Forster, much of

whose treatment of milieu is after all far less explicitly descriptive than suggestively allusive. In such cases, their texts are assuming that readers will be on exactly the same wavelength as the writer. And the risk is that, when readers do actually miss some specific local inflection, they will also miss some larger significance which is dependent on the local for its concretion. Also, of course, an unnoticed local inflection might have been interesting for its own sake, sometimes as a source of in-group humour or even satire.

The list of scholars who have sought to mediate between the sociocultural milieu of Austen and readers with otherwise limited chances of really understanding it is by now a long one. In the case of Forster, there is still much more work to be done, especially as regards the associations of particular places. In the present essay, I am concerned with Forster and Surrey, a Surrey which would have been quite alien territory to contemporaries living in Yorkshire, say, or Devon, and which today may no longer fully exist as quite the same mental construction even for Surrey residents themselves.¹

Forster had been in Surrey on a number of occasions during his childhood and early manhood. Then, together with his mother, he himself became a Surrey resident from the age of 25 to 67—from September 1904 to November 1946,² first at Weybridge, on the banks of the Thames, and from 1925 in the village of Abinger Hammer, just south of the North Downs, the hills which bisect the county from east to west. West Hackhurst, the house in which he lived there, was left to him by his aunt, Laura Forster, for whom it had been designed in the 1870s by his own father, the architect E.M.L. Forster.³ He finally moved away from it only because he was forced to do so, as the result of a bitter feud and legal battle with his neighbours, the Farrer family. As we shall see, he also had other reasons for feeling less than completely at home in Surrey. Yet he had no real alternative home either. During the entire 42-year period from 1904 to 1946, although he spent time abroad, most notably

¹ For further discussion of the theoretical grounds for scholarly mediation see Roger D. Sell, *Literature as Communication: The Foundations of Mediating Criticism* (Amsterdam, 2000). See also the same author's *Mediating Criticism: Literary Education Humanized* (Amsterdam, 2001).

² J.H. Stape, *An E.M. Forster Chronology* (Basingstoke, 1993), p. 146.

³ P.N. Furbank, *E.M. Forster: A Life. Volume One: The Growth of the Novelist (1879-1914)* (London, 1977), pp. 45-46.

in Egypt and India, and also rented rooms in London, it was the Surrey addresses that he regarded as permanent.

Although Surrey nowadays exists in close symbiosis with the capital city just to the north, the county cannot boast a single large mediaeval church.⁴ Right up until the mid-eighteenth century, it was largely cut off from London by marshes flanking the Thames. But then, with the construction of the Westminster and Blackfriars bridges in 1750 and 1769, there was a rapid growth of metropolitan suburbs on the river's Surrey side.⁵ A hundred years further on, the "soft and wild" countryside to the south was opened up by the railways.⁶ Surrey became fashionable, the very heart, eventually, of London's commuter belt. Its suburbias ranged from the country seats of nineteenth-century bankers and merchants to the "bypass variegated" style bemoaned by Osbert Lancaster in the 1930s.⁷ For English people today, the county has associations of cosiness and conservatism, the latter perhaps shading towards conformity and small-mindedness.

Weybridge, where Forster lived between 1904 and 1925, hardly features in his writing at all, even though all of his novels (not including some earlier sketches) were actually written there—in "a commonplace, three-storeyed suburban villa".⁸ But the Surrey Hills, the part of the county in which Forster lived between 1925 and 1946, and nowadays officially protected as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (a distinction possibly connected with the wealth and influence of its inhabitants), did often supply him with subject-matter, and is what mainly interests me here. All in all, the Surrey Hills figure in one novel, one short story, several essays, two pageant plays, and a long memoir spanning the period between the reign of Edward VII and the end of

⁴ Ian Nairn and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Surrey* ([1962] Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 17.

⁵ Francis Shepherd, *London: A History* (Oxford, 1998), p. 207.

⁶ E.M. Forster, "West Hackhurst: A Surrey Ramble" [1943-1947], MS EMF/11/17, Modern Archive, King's College Cambridge, [fol. 14]. I have foliated the manuscript myself, and shall be reproducing the text of "West Hackhurst: A Surrey Ramble", so far unpublished, as an appendix to my forthcoming book-length study of Forster and place.

⁷ Nairn and Pevsner, *Buildings*, pp. 67-74; Osbert Lancaster, *Pillar to Post: The Pocket Lamp of Architecture* (London, 1938), pp. 68-69).

⁸ Furbank, *Forster*, p. 119.

World War Two and centring on West Hackhurst. My chief focus is on the novel, *A Room with a View* (1908), but as a way of contextualizing it within personal, social, cultural and political developments to which his sense of Surrey continued to respond, I shall also glance at one of the essays, “My Wood” (1926), and here and there at the West Hackhurst memoir (of the 1940s).

In the West Hackhurst memoir, he situates the genesis of *A Room with a View*, not in the trip to Italy he made with his mother after graduation in 1901, but several years earlier.⁹ As a teenager, Forster had from time to time been obliged to represent his Aunt Laura at Surrey social gatherings. Often he got a poor reception. But on one occasion he was welcomed in a much more friendly manner, albeit by a woman not generally approved of in the neighbourhood and, indeed, regarded as a “misalliance” for her titled husband:

I have lost the figure and the face of Lady Bowman and the sound of her voice, and I can't remember anything else she said or did. But <this> \hers/ is the behaviour I admire, and there was not much of it in Surrey <in the nineties> at the turn of the century—the Surrey I have tried to indicate in *A Room with a View*.

(“West Hackhurst” [fol. 7])¹⁰

At least as much as Samuel Butler or Edward Carpenter, then, Lady Bowman could be the original for the novel's Mr Emerson. In other words, this note in the Surrey memoir suggests a hidden history for *A Room with a View* in Forster's youth and that particular locality.

Although *A Room with a View* is now relatively neglected among his writings, between the 1940s and the 1970s it received detailed critical attention, and even today still has a reputation as “Forster's sunniest

⁹ Early versions of the novel survive under the titles (which Forster gave them) of “Old Lucy” and “New Lucy” (E.M.Forster, *The Lucy Novels: Early Sketches for “A Room with a View”* (London, 1977). “Lucy” was begun in March 1902 (see J.H. Stape, *An E.M. Forster Chronology* (Basingstoke, 1993) p. 12), before any of Forster's other novels, put aside for *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *The Longest Journey*, then taken up again in 1907 and turned into *A Room with a View*. For the composition history see Oliver Stallybrass, “Editor's Introduction”, in E.M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (London, 1977), pp. vii-ix.

¹⁰ In transcription of this manuscript, I use arrow brackets (“<...>”) to denote text marked for deletion by Forster, and forward and backward slashes (“\.../”) to indicate material which he inserted into the text during an edit.

novel”,¹¹ usually viewed as a novel of Italy. As for the early reviews, they can nowadays seem slightly absurd.¹² According to the *Athenaeum*, the novel’s dialogue was “amateurish”, and Forster thought the Emersons “abominably impertinent” for offering to guide Lucy Honeychurch round the Santa Croce church in Florence.¹³ Yet some of the first commentators made observations which, from my present point of view, seem far more astute than much of the later, more academic criticism.

Especially striking is a review by C.F.G. Masterman in *The Nation*, H.W. Massingham’s authoritative organ of the Liberal party.¹⁴ In Masterman’s view, the title of Forster’s third novel could have served for the two previous ones as well. All three contained contrasts between a constricted and social “room” and a wild, elemental “view”. And it was here that Masterman spotted something which many later critics could not see: that *A Room with a View* does *not* dramatize an opposition between England and Italy.¹⁵ On the contrary, the “room” can encompass both “the English pension at Florence [... and] the spreading suburbs of Surrey, in those regions where the new rich and the emigrant clerk are

¹¹ John Colmer, *E.M. Forster: The Personal Voice* (London, 1975), p. 43.

¹² All the early reviews here cited are reprinted in Philip Gardner (ed.) *E.M. Forster: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1973).

¹³ *Athenaeum*, 19th December 1908. See also E.M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (London, 1978), p. 43). The text of this, the Penguin edition of the novel, is based on the Abinger (London, 1977), and the Abinger’s introductory and editorial material (apart from textual notes) are reproduced in the Penguin as well. Since the Penguin edition is the more widely available, I use it for my references here.

¹⁴ Masterman’s sensitivity to Forster’s text was doubtless partly due to affinities of personal background. Educated at Cambridge, he was a postgraduate researcher and a Fellow of Christ’s during Forster’s time as an undergraduate at King’s. His family’s similarity with Forster’s Thornton forebears, bankers and evangelical Anglicans, was particularly close. On his mother’s side, he, too, was a member of the Liberal intellectual elite: they were the Gurney family of Norwich, a Quaker banking and political dynasty. At the time of his review (28th November 1908), he was a Liberal MP for a working-class district of East London. See entry in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).

¹⁵ Among those who make this mistake, Norman Page argues that Lucy is educated by Italy as a place (Norman Page, *E.M. Forster* (Basingstoke, 1987), p. 39).

making desolate the hills which look southward to the sea”.¹⁶ Florence and “the little semi-urban village of the Surrey hillside”—a more exact description of Summer Street in *A Room with a View* than any since—can both open into the eternal: in the case of the Surrey village, into the nearby pinewoods and the “grey glimpse of sea” to the south.¹⁷

So the early reviewers immediately understood the novel’s milieu, and frequently commented on the particular setting of its second, longer part: Virginia Stephen (later Woolf) that it is in Surrey;¹⁸ the *Morning Post* that “the bourgeois home” of the Honeychurches overlooks the Sussex Weald.¹⁹ Unlike later academics who have themselves become increasingly distanced in time and place from the novel, these contemporary journalists clearly took for granted that their own readers, too, would understand such references to specific English places.²⁰ Since 1908, criticism of *A Room with a View* has veered off towards the universal and then returned to new versions of the particular. But recent particularist criticism has not been interested in the matters of local geographic identity that were so straightforwardly apparent to the earliest reviewers. Those first commentators saw the novel’s settings, not as just a background, but as in and of themselves a significant focus of attention. One of the few present-day scholars beginning to rehabilitate that older perspective is Franco Moretti, whose *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* stresses that in novels “each space determines, or at least encourages, its own kind of story”.²¹

¹⁶ [C.F.G. Masterman], “The Half-hidden Life”, *The Nation*, 28th November 1908, pp. 352-4, esp. 352.

¹⁷ Making much the same point as Masterman, though perhaps less generally sympathetic, R.A. Scott-James noted that both the Pension Bertolini and Summer Street are “semi-suburban” (“A Novel of Character”, *Daily News*, 20th October 1908).

¹⁸ [Virginia Stephen], Review, *Times Literary Supplement*, 22nd October 1908, p. 362.

¹⁹ Anon., “A Clever Novel”, *Morning Post*, 23rd November 1908, p. 2.

²⁰ Forster himself apparently noted that “the novel mainly appealed to the young and business men” (see John Beer, *The Achievement of E.M. Forster* (London, 1963), p. 65).

²¹ Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* (London, 1998), p. 70.

To simplify, up until now critics of *A Room with a View* have fallen into two main groups: the universalizers and the particularists. In both groups some critics are more pragmatic than others, which is to say that, rather than just applying some rigid “theory”, they are ready to respond to the individual variety of what they find in Forster. But broadly speaking, the universalizers attempt to apprehend him as a coherent whole, and there is often an evaluative dimension to their work, usually connected with some message he is perceived as having for humankind as a whole. The particularists, on the other hand, are less holistic, and stress differences between one sociocultural formation and another. Up until the 1970s, universalizers predominated. Since then, localism has come to the fore, even if this watershed may be partly more apparent than real—the most detailed study of *A Room with a View* during the last twenty years is by Jeffrey Heath (1994) and belongs to the universalizing camp.

What Lionel Trilling (1943),²² John Beer (1963),²³ John Colmer (1975),²⁴ Glen Cavaliero (1979),²⁵ Norman Page (1987)²⁶ and Jeffrey Heath (1994)²⁷ all take as their main focus is, not place, but the writer and the text, typically concerning themselves with the novel’s perceived strengths and weaknesses. Among the points commended by Trilling is Forster’s treatment of the human body, a topic resumed by many subsequent critics, up to and including queer theorists of the 1990s. The high water mark here is the work by Colmer and Cavaliero, which, unlike criticism before 1970, freely discusses Forster’s homosexuality and draws on the many private papers becoming available. Like all the universalists, they are quite convinced that Forster is a major writer whose novels and ideas deserve detailed exposition.

A number of other critics, by contrast, adopt specific theoretical perspectives: Wilfred Stone (1966)²⁸ is Jungian; George H. Thomson

²² *E.M. Forster* (Norfolk).

²³ *The Achievement of E.M. Forster* (London).

²⁴ *E.M. Forster: The Personal Voice* (London).

²⁵ *A Reading of E.M. Forster* (London).

²⁶ *E.M. Forster* (Basingstoke).

²⁷ “Kissing and Telling: Turning Round in *A Room with a View*,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 40 (1994) 393-433.

²⁸ *The Cave and the Mountain: A Study of E.M. Forster* (Stanford).

(1967)²⁹ is formalist; David Dowling (1985)³⁰ is aesthetic-theoretical; James Buzard (1993)³¹ is discursive-Foucauldian; and Eric Haralson (1997)³² is queer-theoretical. These commentators rarely claim to offer a complete picture of Forster, and Dowling, Buzard and Haralson, the main particularists, as I am calling them, employ contextualizing commentaries which tend to subordinate Forster's life-story to some preferred cultural topic. Another, more valuable feature of some recent criticism is the careful attention paid to Forster's writings outside the novels, whereas the universalizers prize the novels above all else, a preference clearly present even in Heath, despite his interest in Forster as a critic.

A Room with a View opens up to both universalist and particularist criticism, but what these approaches have ignored is the novel's exact geographical contexts. Trilling's place terms are England and Italy: within England, he mentions neither Surrey nor any other place divisions. Beer does note that in the second part "[t]he scene changes to Surrey",³³ but that is that. Thomson, Colmer and Buzard (despite Buzard's ostensible concern with place) do not mention the county once. Colmer and Page both categorize the book as simply one of Forster's "Italian Novels".³⁴ Stone merely places its "second half"—to be more accurate, he would have had to say its last two thirds—"in England", and his sharpest observation, about "a fancy country suburb in Surrey", is just a flash in the pan.³⁵ Cavaliero, though noting that after the Italian trip "the main parties are then reassembled in Surrey", thinks that the second

²⁹ "The Italian Romances" [1967], in Harold Bloom (ed.), *E.M. Forster* (New York, 1987), pp. 27-45.

³⁰ *Bloomsbury Aesthetics and the Novels of Forster and Woolf* (London).

³¹ "Forster's Trespasses: Tourism and Cultural Politics" [1993], in Jeremy Tambling (ed.), *E.M. Forster* (Basingstoke, 1995), pp. 14-29.

³² "'Thinking about Homosex' in Forster and James", in Robert K. Martin and George Piggford (eds), *Queer Forster* (Chicago), pp. 59-73.

³³ Beer, *Achievement*, p. 54.

³⁴ Colmer, *Forster*, p. 42; and Page, *Forster*, p. 18. In a study combining biography and literary criticism, Mary Lago classes *A Room with a View* among its author's "Suburban Novels" (*E.M. Forster: A Literary Life* (New York, 1995), p. 8). But this is not quite right either. The reviewers' terms "semi-urban" and "semi-suburban" terms are better, if only because they lack the baggage of the word *suburban*.

³⁵ Stone, *Cave*, pp. 226, 218.

part of the novel describes “[t]he Tunbridge Wells world”,³⁶ and could hardly be more wrong. Not only is Tunbridge Wells in Kent. For Forster, though both Tunbridge Wells and the Surrey Hills at least belong to the Home Counties, there is a world of difference between them—the former so stuffy, the latter so “soft and wild”. Tunbridge Wells, after all, is the home of Charlotte Bartlett, and is the place where Lucy, according to Mr Beebe, “was not wonderful.”³⁷ For all that her parents were incomers to Surrey, Lucy is not a child of the claustrophobic spa.

Much more than with Italy, *A Room with a View* is concerned with a very specific part of South East England: the region on the borders of Surrey and Sussex, between the North Downs and the Weald. Part Two of the novel, which consists of Chapters 8 to 20, all of them set in England (except for the brief epilogue back in Florence), and all of them (apart from one chapter in London) set in this particular corner of Surrey, is nearly twice as long as the Italian Part One. Although to the first reviewers this was perfectly obvious, much of the imagery and commentary with which the novel has later been surrounded do present it as a novel about Italy. The cover of the current Penguin Classics paperback, and the cover and endpapers of the standard hardback in the Abinger Edition, are both adorned with photos of Florence. In Finnish, the very title of the novel becomes *Hotelli Firenzessä* [a hotel in Florence],³⁸ and the poster for the 1985 Merchant-Ivory film shows Julian Sands (as George Emerson) and Helena Bonham-Carter (as Lucy) against a backdrop of the duomo and the Palazzo Vecchio’s tower, visible through the window behind them. There is not the slightest suggestion of England and English places here, and it is easy to guess why: for film audiences of the 1980s, Italy was a selling-point. As for the novel’s Italian version, its title is *Camera con vista*—a faithful translation rather than an attempt to make reparations to England. Yet the fact remains that the novel does emerge from that very particular local English context, a context already partly recognizable from the pages of Meredith’s *The Egoist* or G.T. Chesney’s *Battle of Dorking* (1871),³⁹ and

³⁶ Cavaliero, *A Reading*, p. 94.

³⁷ Forster, *Room*, p. 111.

³⁸ (Jyväskylä, 1986).

³⁹ [George Tomkyns Chesney] *The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer* (Edinburgh, 1871), a wildly successful book, inaugurated the invasion scare genre (studied by I.F. Clarke (“Introduction”, in George Chesney and Saki,

one which Forster develops with great care, bringing in both the county's own name and other place-names as well, so as to give us this one precise part of Surrey as opposed to other, unmentioned parts. It is not Clapham, for instance, home of some of his ancestors. Nor is it Weybridge, his own home as of 1904, and the place where the book was actually written. Much closer the mark is Holmbury St Mary, the original of Summer Street in the novel.

Part Two constructs Surrey as a place of sandy pine woods and deep lanes running up hillsides that are dotted with the seats of wealthy commuters, with a train not far away to take them to London. Less clearly established is the exact period at which the story is set. To approach this in a somewhat round-about way, we can first note that, not far from the beginning of Part One, one of the earliest things we read about Lucy's home is that it is not "a manufacturing district".⁴⁰ Here

The Battle of Dorking [1871] and *When William Came* [1913] (Oxford, 1970) pp. ix-xxii) and Franco Moretti (*Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* (London, 1998), p. 139). Chesney describes the setting of his fictional war thus:

Meantime there was leisure to look around, and from where we stood there was a commanding view of one of the most beautiful scenes in England. Our regiment was drawn up on the extremity of the ridge which runs from Guildford to Dorking. This is indeed merely a part of the great chalk-range which extends from beyond Aldershot east to the Medway; but there is a gap in the ridge just here where the little stream that runs past Dorking turns suddenly to the north, to find its way to the Thames.

(Battle of Dorking (1871), pp. 28-29)

Cooler and more prosaic than Forster, Chesney nevertheless had the sense of geographic expanse, anticipating, for instance, the view of England northwards from Dorset in *Howards End*. His attention to geology recalls Hardy (though geology was of course a Victorian obsession), and again foreshadows Forster. But his work flourished in a very different political context, coming under attack from Gladstone for alarmism when it first appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*. Later on Chesney became a colonial and army administrator and, in the 1890s, a Conservative MP. See entry in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).

⁴⁰ But between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries Abinger had been one of the centres of the Wealden iron industry, and thus one of England's earliest manufacturing districts (Shirley Corke, *Abinger Hammer, Surrey: A Short History and Guide to the Village* (Abinger, 1993). Forster certainly knew this. In

Lucy and the other tourists in the Pension Bertolini are playing the game which the English abroad still play today, of identifying social class through seemingly innocent chit-chat. The political colouring of Lucy's home background is what leads the novelist Miss Lavish to guess that she came from the Midlands or North:

"Indeed, I'm not! [i.e. not shocked at Miss Lavish's claim to be a "real Radical"]" exclaimed Lucy. "We are Radicals, too, out and out. My father always voted for Mr. Gladstone, until he was so dreadful about Ireland."

"I see, I see. And now you have gone over to the enemy."

"Oh, please— ! If my father was alive, I am sure he would vote Radical again now that Ireland is all right. And as it is, the glass over our front door was broken last election, and Freddy is sure it was the Tories; but mother says nonsense, a tramp."

"Shameful! A manufacturing district, I suppose?"

"No—in the Surrey hills. About five miles from Dorking, looking over the Weald."

(*Room*, pp. 37-38)

It seems from this that Mr Honeychurch, like Forster's Aunt Laura (who lived at West Hackhurst from 1877 to 1924), was a Liberal Unionist: one of the Liberal supporters who broke with the party after Gladstone's support for Irish Home Rule became public in 1886.⁴¹ Now if Lucy is about twenty at the time the novel is set, and if the story is thought of as happening during the years—approximately 1903-1907—when Forster was actually writing it, then she can hardly remember her father's political "always" except as a matter of family tradition. In the 1940s memoir about West Hackhurst, Forster first writes that the Surrey which he "tried to indicate in *A Room with a View*" was that of "the nineties", and then, revising the memoir, changes this to "the turn of the century".

his pageant-play about Abinger his invites his audience to "listen to the hammers at Abinger".

⁴¹ The passage from *A Room with a View* quoted above is closely paralleled by one in the West Hackhurst memoir:

They did not agree politically—and politics in those idyllic days meant/<that is to say about> Ireland. The Farrers were Radicals and followed Mr Gladstone, my aunt was a Liberal Unionist In fact I think she founded the Surrey brand of that forgotten party. She cared passionately about Ireland. ("West Hackhurst", [fol. 17])

He himself seems to have been unsure whether the novel's time setting was the last decade of Queen Victoria's reign, during most of which Gladstone (d. 1898) was still alive, or the following one. The novel's Surrey is one in which "motor-cars" raise dust in an Edwardian enough way.⁴² Yet they defile the countryside a good bit less than in *Howards End*.

Be the precise period what it may, the conversation in the Pension Bertolini at least begins to establish the tripartite division of Lucy's home territory into county, market town and physical geography. What it also broaches is the question of party-political tradition, which to Masterman and the readers of *The Nation* would have been just as comprehensible as these geographical bearings, with which there would have been a piquant political connection. Politics was far more divisive then than now, and in the General Election of 1906 a million more votes were cast than six years earlier, meaning that old-established elites might well feel threatened. As Miss Lavish is starting to fathom out, the Honeychurches and their neighbour, the local squire Sir Harry Otway, "a Radical if ever there was", belong to a small section of the Home Counties gentry that was politically Liberal and religiously Anglican, even though Liberal politics were more commonly associated with Nonconformism, towns, and industry.⁴³ Such affinities between Nonconformism, evangelical Anglicanism and the Liberal elite were ideologically in line with Forster's Aunt Laura and her friend Lady Farrer, scion of the Wedgwood industrial dynasty, and were to recur elsewhere in his writings, for instance in the West Hackhurst memoir.⁴⁴

After Lucy's early use of the word "Surrey" in the Pension Bertolini, the word recurs only twice, both times towards the novel's close. First, when Mr Beebe and his companions are heading for the Beehive Tavern to discuss Lucy's fate over tea, there is a striking piece of landscape description. Imperceptibly, the view as seen by Mr Beebe merges into the view as seen, to wonderful effect, by the authorial narrator:

The sky had grown wilder since he stood there last hour, giving to the land a tragic greatness that is rare in Surrey. Gray clouds were charging across tissues of white,

⁴² *Room*, p. 143.

⁴³ *Room*, p. 38.

⁴⁴ Forster there ("West Hackhurst" [fols. 3-5]) gives his version of the Wedgwood family culture.

which stretched and shredded and tore slowly, until through their final layers there gleamed a hint of the disappearing blue.

(*Room*, p. 204)

No, Surrey is not the Lake District or Egdon Heath, but is the most suburbanized county of all.⁴⁵ Yet for all that, here Forster is giving us a pretty strong dash of the Sublime, and it is *this* county, suddenly and so surprisingly ambiguous, which provides the setting for Lucy's story. At the time of Mr Beebe's vision, it seems as if her future could well be a sad one, and certainly tinged with tragedy. She risks losing George, after all, which could doom her to something she would not enjoy: a life of cold virginity like those of Charlotte and Beebe. Such a scenario would also be in keeping with the closing chapters' many references to "darkness", as summer gives way to autumn and winter.⁴⁶ Which is where we come upon the last use of the word "Surrey", to describe a county which, though picturesque, is enclosed and very dank. When Lucy and her mother are returning from London to meet the people who might accompany Lucy to Greece, they

spoke little in the train, little again in the carriage, which met them at Dorking Station. It had poured all day and as they ascended through the deep Surrey lanes showers of water fell from the overhanging beech trees and rattled on the hood.

(*Room*, p. 215)

This is the slightly unsettling prelude to the novel's denouement: the encounter with old Mr Emerson at Mr Beebe's rectory while that clergyman is officiating in church. The lanes, "worn down deep into the greensand",⁴⁷ were a quintessential feature of the Surrey Hills,⁴⁸ which Forster's writings continue to mention, sometimes with a certain slightly

⁴⁵ According to Nairn and Pevsner, "Surrey is entirely devoted to serving urban man" (*Buildings*, p. 23). They also remark that "A history of English medieval architecture could be written without once mentioning a single surviving Surrey building; a history of the suburb or the folly could almost be written without going outside the county. [...] [T]here is plenty of architecture to see in Surrey, but it is very often the small, the picturesque, or the *recherché*" (*ibid*, p. 17).

⁴⁶ *Room*, pp. 142, 178. There are twelve uses of the word "darkness" in the last four chapters of the novel.

⁴⁷ E.M. Forster, *Abinger Harvest* (London 1936), p. 348.

⁴⁸ Nairn & Pevsner, *Buildings*, p. 19.

gloomy nostalgia.⁴⁹ In the West Hackhurst memoir, he would look back to carriage rides in the 1890s, when, as a teenage visitor, he used to “thread the Surrey lanes” in the company of Aunt Laura, Lady Farrer, and minor literary celebrities such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s daughter.⁵⁰ In the “Abinger Pageant”, one feature of the area’s past would be the smugglers who supposedly used the woods and lanes for cover.⁵¹

Lucy is embedded in this county by birth, and its society is the one “out of which Cecil proposed to rescue” her. Her family are not old stock, however, though they did build their house before the arrival of *nouveaux riches* from London, who promptly mistook them for “the remnants of an indigenous aristocracy.”⁵² If the countryside is supposed to be a place where, as in Hardy, people have been rooted in the same unchanging life for centuries, then Forster’s Summer Street is not countryside at all, but a synthesis of both older and much newer vintages, just like its original, Holmbury St Mary, which was formed from an agglomeration of old hamlets in the 1870s. Similarly, in his West Hackhurst memoir Forster said of the Second Baron Farrer that “he doesn’t belong to <this part of England> \Surrey/ at all. Who \indeed/ does?”⁵³

A *county* embodies place identity at a level above the very local and below the national, and for Forster each county has a unique character.⁵⁴ So much so, that in representing England he does not offer some holistic description along straightforwardly “modern”, nationalist or imperialist

⁴⁹ “Greensand” is the local term for the band of Surrey land between the chalk Downs to the north and the clay soils of the Weald to the south. The dimensions and extent of this band are described by Henry Elliot Malden (*A History of Surrey* (London, 1900), p. 5).

⁵⁰ “West Hackhurst”, [fols.11-12].

⁵¹ *Abinger Harvest*, p. 348.

⁵² *Room*, p. 129.

⁵³ “West Hackhurst”, [fol. 15].

⁵⁴ In this, Forster recalls (perhaps intentionally, perhaps not) to the patchwork England of Michael Drayton’s *Poly-Olbion* (1612-1622), and the local allegiances of the great county antiquaries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (on whom see W.G. Hoskins, *Local History in England* (3rd ed., Harlow, 1984), pp. 18-30). The significance of county identities is often held to have lessened since industrialization; this point is made in relation to Surrey by F.J.C. Hearnshaw, *The Place of Surrey in the History of England* ([1936] Wakefield, 1971), p. 185. An emphasis on county can thus be a sort of nostalgia.

lines, for instance. Then, alongside the concept of the particular county, a place can be further pinned down by reference to the local *country town*, and to a *geographical feature*—in this novel, to Dorking and the Sussex Weald respectively, as in that early conversation in the Pension Bertolini. In 1901 Dorking was a town and railway hub with fewer than 8,000 inhabitants.⁵⁵ The Weald is the stretch of clay, once heavily forested, between the North and South Downs, and once quite separate as legal entity. Geologically, the Weald is the area of “[t]he thin, poor soils of the greensand ridges and the Wealden sandstones”, and of “the heavy, clay soil of the interior”, sometimes described as South East England’s last frontier, a region that long resisted “colonization”.⁵⁶ And to use the terms first suggested by Masterman, while Dorking contributes to the book’s notion of “room”, the Weald is inseparable from its notion of “view”.

While Lucy is still in Florence, the Weald comes up again as she thinks of home:

The road up through the pine-woods, the clean drawing-room, the view over the Sussex Weald—all hung before her bright and distinct, but pathetic as the pictures in a gallery to which, after much experience, a traveller returns.

(*Room*, p. 77)

Later, the Weald stands for landscape, outlook, breadth of perspective, and the lovable uniqueness of Lucy’s own home at Windy Corner—“her mother and Windy Corner and the Weald in the declining sun were perfect”.⁵⁷ At such moments Forster’s expatiation on the grandeur of landscape can recall Hardy or Turner.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Eleventh Edition (1910-1911) s.v. “Dorking”. On the development of the town after the arrival of a direct railway connection with London in 1867 see Peter Brandon, *A History of Surrey* (London, 1977), p. 89.

⁵⁶ See John Talbot White, *The South-East Down and Weald: Kent, Surrey and Sussex* (London, 1977), pp. 99-100. Between 500 AD and about 1350, the Weald changed from a “primeval forest” into “a settled country, though more heavily wooded and sparsely populated than most” (K.P. Witney, *The Jutish Forest: A Study of the Weald of Kent from 450 to 1380 A.D.* (London, 1976), p. 1).

⁵⁷ *Room*, p. 157.

⁵⁸ David Dowling considers the general thrust of *A Room with a View* to be anti-aesthetic, but recognizes that “[l]andscape painting, that art most in touch with the real world, is the one art to escape censure in the novel” (*Bloomsbury*

But it was transfigured by the view beyond, for Windy Corner was built on the range that overlooks the Sussex Weald. Lucy [...] seemed on the edge of a green magic carpet which hovered in the air above the tremulous world.

(*Room*, p. 105)

She was gazing sideways. Seated on a promontory herself, she could see the pine-clad promontories descending one beyond another into the Weald. The further one descended the garden, the more glorious was this lateral view.

(*Room*, p. 133)

Windy Corner lay, not on the summit of the ridge, but a few hundred feet down the southern slope, at the springing of one of the great buttresses that supported the hill. On either side of it was a shallow ravine, filled with ferns and pine trees, and down the ravine on the left ran the highway into the Weald.

(*Room*, p. 195)

And the perspective here is always *over* the Weald. Forster never takes us *into* it. It is rather a region to which one might dream of betaking oneself, perhaps as a liberation from some kind of confinement, as when Lucy realizes the mistake she has made in becoming engaged to Cecil Vyse, the aesthete who lives with his mother. Here the separation into the two different “countries” of the Hills and the Weald is especially clear:

The Sunday after Miss Bartlett's arrival was a glorious day, like most of the days of that year. In the Weald, autumn approached, breaking up the green monotony of summer, touching the parks with the grey bloom of mist, the beech trees with russet, the oak trees with gold. Up on the heights, battalions of black pines witnessed the change, themselves unchangeable. Either country was spanned by a cloudless sky, and in either arose the tinkle of church bells.

(*Room*, p. 167)

—and this geographical distinction becomes an objective correlative for Lucy's spiritual dilemma. Intensifying the moment by a switch to present tense, Forster has her look at the Weald as an escape from “her new cerise dress [,] [...] a failure”.

Her eyes are bent to the Weald. She frowns a little—not in anger, but as a brave child frowns when he is trying not to cry. In all that expanse no human eye is

Aesthetic, p. 52). As will emerge below, Cecil, the novel's aesthete character, is in my own view a conscious projection of one aspect of Forster's own shadow-self.

looking at her, and she may frown unrebuked and measure the spaces that yet survive between Apollo and the western hills.

(*Room*, pp. 167-168)

For Forster “[T]he western hills” would connote an underlying, mystical England, something lost which he repeatedly attempted to grasp, as in the Wiltshire of *The Longest Journey*, for example, or in the greenwood of *Maurice*. The Weald’s adjacency to such ancient western secrets, ultimately to Hardy country, is caught again in the West Hackhurst memoir, when the eccentric Baron Farrer is said to have “told me that the western hedge of West Hackhurst [...] had once been/ the eastern <boundary> \hedge/ of the Kingdom of Wessex”.⁵⁹ And the Weald itself, historically one of the chief examples of wilderness in the South-East, can trigger the same sense of England’s wild past.⁶⁰ It is partly thanks to its nearness that the Honeychurches’ home at Windy Corner has such a different feel from Tunbridge Wells and Forster’s fictional Sawston. It is the Weald that offers such an enticing substitute for the views Lucy has recently come to love in Italy.

Ah, how beautiful the Weald looked! The hills stood out above its radiance, as Fiesole stands above the Tuscan Plain, and the South Downs, if one chose, were the mountains of Carrara. She might be forgetting her Italy, but she was noticing more things in her England. One could play a new game with the view, and try to find in its innumerable folds some town or village that would do for Florence.

(*Room*, p. 175)

Dorking, by contrast, is associated with the book’s negative concept: muddle—with confusion, disharmony, the effects of unkind behaviour. More concretely, it involves commerce, railways, and the spread of London, which under Forster’s gaze can turn into garish farce.

Albert was inhabited. His tortured garden was bright with geraniums and lobelias and polished shells. His little windows were chastely swathed in Nottingham lace. Cissie was to let. Three noticeboards, belonging to Dorking agents, lolled on her fence and announced the not surprising fact.

(*Room*, p. 120)

⁵⁹ “West Hackhurst”, [fol. 14].

⁶⁰ See Witney, *Jutish Forest*.

Surrey's architectural history, negligible until the coming of the railway, from then onwards was to include much pastiche and bogus vernacular.⁶¹ "Cissie" and "Albert" are a pair of little villas built by Flack, a local builder who, like Leonard Bast in *Howards End*, is a Ruskin enthusiast. He received the commission from Sir Harry Otway. But Otway becomes uncomfortable about the end product; there is confusion over why Cissie was built in the first place; and the question of who "her" tenants will be is just as puzzling—arrangements are repeatedly messed up by Charlotte. As we first see them, the two houses are deeply camp. Nor does Forster ever take us inside. Although Cissie becomes the home of the supposedly heroic and cleansing Emersons, it is at Windy Corner that George and Lucy meet.

The county's strained relationship with London is also reflected in some of the novel's plotting and constellations of characters. In the Emersons, the increasing pressure from the metropolis after the arrival of the railways is personified. Before the novel's action commences, George's only notion of Surrey has probably derived from a trip he had made with his mother, when he had seen "as far as Hindhead",⁶² the beauty-spot which became the site of a late Victorian literary colony visited by Tennyson, and which from 1859 was easily accessible from the London-to-Portsmouth line's stop at Haslemere. Old Mr Emerson has been something "to do with journalism", no doubt in Fleet Street, and George, who actually works as a head office clerk for one of the railway companies, in the end comes to feel that Cissie Villa is "too far out of town".⁶³ The Emersons, then, are associated with Fleet Street, the City, and the railway termini—and in this way are also carefully distinguished from those other Londoners, Cecil and his mother, of Beauchamp Mansions, S.W..⁶⁴ According to "A Room without a View", Forster's 1958 coda to the novel, George was eventually to become a Whitehall civil servant, and he and his wife made a "squalid move from Highgate to Carshalton".⁶⁵

For a middle-class resident of the Surrey Hills, London can be bane or blessing. The down-side is in the sense of the Hills as a paradise under

⁶¹ Nairn & Pevsner, *Buildings*, p. 17.

⁶² *Room*, p. 178.

⁶³ *Room*, p. 178.

⁶⁴ *Room*, p. 140.

⁶⁵ *Room*, p. 232.

siege. In *A Room with a View*, “[t]he London fog tries to enter the pine-woods, pouring through the gaps in the northern hills”.⁶⁶ A more positive view of London is suggested in the West Hackhurst memoir, where Forster records an escape from semi-suburbia which might have shocked some admirers of the Romantic and Victorian poetry on which he, too, had been brought up:

The Farrers apart, it/ <It> was too female a house, I had always had to fit in <their> there, and now I felt trapped in its ovary, and would climb to the top of the downs, and look longingly towards industrialism and London. There, by a rare inversion, was romance, there energy and initiative were possible. Bloomsbury and more than Bloomsbury opened their gates. (“West Hackhurst” [fol. 22v])

As noted earlier, when Forster was actually writing *A Room with a View* he was living in Weybridge, and not in that other corner of Surrey which is captured in the novel itself. Since 1894, when he and his mother had left Rooksnest in Hertfordshire (the original of Howards End), they had been leading a peripatetic life, in Tonbridge, in Tunbridge Wells, and in London, where they lived in a Bloomsbury Temperance hotel like the one the Miss Alans stay at in *A Room with a View*, and in a South Kensington mansion block with possible connections to the “Well-Appointed Flat” of Cecil Vyse’s mother.⁶⁷ Forster was far from totally disliking life as livable at such addresses. And it was not until two decades later, in 1925, that the Surrey Hills became his home, if that is really the right word. Throughout his life, his own feelings about West Hackhurst, and the Surrey world around it, were somewhat ambiguous, and sometimes extremely painful.

Both as an indication of those feelings’ development after he did take up residence, and for the further light it retrospectively sheds on Surrey in *A Room with a View*, the short essay “My Wood” (1926) is essential reading, despite its apparent slightness and whimsicality as compared with other items collected in *Abinger Harvest*.⁶⁸ It first appeared in *The New Leader* for 15th October 1926 under the longer title, “My Wood, or the effects of property upon character”.⁶⁹ *The New Leader* was an organ

⁶⁶ *Room*, p. 130.

⁶⁷ *Room*, pp. 211, 138.

⁶⁸ *Abinger Harvest*, pp. 23-36.

⁶⁹ The title recalls a schoolboy essay of Forster’s, “The influence of climate and physical conditions upon national character”, awarded the English essay prize at

of the Independent Labour Party,⁷⁰ and in 1926 its pages were filled with denunciations of Stanley Baldwin's government and support for the coal miners who led that year's unsuccessful General Strike. In the aftermath of the First World War Forster, like many English intellectuals, moved towards the socialist left,⁷¹ a point well worth remembering, given recent critical portraits of him as a complacent, quasi-imperialist bourgeois.

As he aged, issues connected with ownership, possession and property did increasingly worry him, and he never lost the habit of fantasizing alternative histories for himself. In *A Room with a View* Cecil, Freddy Honeychurch and the clergyman Mr Beebe are all projections—George, interestingly, is not—of what Forster himself could have become had things been different. “My Wood” is about Piney Copse, a tiny piece of land adjacent to West Hackhurst, which he bought with the profits from *A Passage to India*. Speculating on the psychological effects of owning something, the essay half-seriously imagines him becoming a fat, greedy, restless, selfish proprietor. According to his later account in the West Hackhurst memoir, Piney Copse offered him his

Tonbridge School in 1897, and described by Furbank as “an excellent pastiche of Ruskin” (P.N. Furbank, *E.M. Forster: A Life. Volume One: The Growth of the Novelist (1879-1914)* (London, 1977), pp. 47-48). The present librarian of Tonbridge School has no knowledge of its whereabouts, and it is not apparently at King's. In an interview on 10th January 1958, Forster said “I think the copy is lost” (Wilfred Stone, “Some Interviews with E.M. Forster, 1957-58, 1965”, *Twentieth Century Literature* 43 (1997) 57-74), though according to B.J. Kirkpatrick (*A Bibliography of E.M. Forster* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1985) p. 123) the final ten paragraphs of the essay still exist.

⁷⁰ See entry for “Brockway, (Archibald) Fenner, Baron Brockway (1888-1988)” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).

⁷¹ Forster made eleven contributions to *The New Leader* in the four years after October 1922 (Kirkpatrick, *Bibliography*). Under the editorship of H.N. Brailsford, the periodical was at that time “balancing ideological exhortation with cultural enrichment” (according to F. M. Leventhal, in his entry on Brailsford in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* 2004). As well as Forster's contribution, the 15th October 1926 number included a leading article taking issue with *The Nation* on the nature and objectives of “The Class Struggle”, plus a piece by G.B. Shaw on “Socialism and the Living Wage: Labour's Twofold Task”.

nearest approach to feudalism. My next nearest had been at the age of fourteen, in the Howards End house in Hertfordshire. We were turned out of it. If the land had welcomed me [...] more effectively at West Hackhurst; <another> \the Tory/ side of my character would have developed, and my liberalisms been atrophied.

(“West Hackhurst”, [fols. 24r-v.]

A proprietorial attachment to “the land” would seem to come very close to Tory values, and in “My Wood” he presents himself as struggling, albeit on a smaller scale, with the same dilemma as Sir Harry Otway in *A Room with a View*. How, at one and the same time, can one be a good Liberal or, as in Forster’s own case, a Labour supporter and a country landowner? The essay casts him as a rural landlord resentfully glowering at the mass of coarse tourists arriving by train or charabanc to despoil his Meredithian paradise.

Other ladies, less educated, roll down the bracken in the arms of their gentlemen friends. There is paper, there are tins. Pray, does my wood belong to me or doesn’t it?

(“My Wood”, p. 25)

His attitude here very much recalls the Summer Street residents of the earlier novel. Lucy’s neighbours are characterized by “their kindly affluence, their inexploding religion, their dislike of paper bags, orange-peel, and broken bottles”.⁷² And in effect, the essay dramatizes Forster as one of their ilk, so alerting us to a certain empathy in the novel’s treatment of them, for which its ironies at their expense are all the richer. During the 1930s and 1940s the tension between socialist values and gentry status was to become a matter of serious anxiety to him, as he turned into the ratty, resentful old man of the West Hackhurst memoir, who clashes so bitterly with the Farrer family, and who finds in his own personal antagonisms a symbol of the state of England as a whole. But in “My Wood”, and still more in *A Room with a View*, the touch is much lighter. The issue of place-ownership is real enough, but the writing is not distorted by personal bias and opens itself to various perspectives.

“My Wood” links the pettinesses of ownership in a tiny Surrey village to problems of ownership at large, one such problem being that the Scriptures may be right: in the Kingdom of Heaven, perhaps the rich will neither own, nor even occupy a place. Place-ownership is also a

⁷² *Room*, p. 129.

matter of relationships between entire countries, holistically viewed: England, India and America. Between the two World Wars, Forster's views on this point were to change, perhaps partly in harmony with his antagonism against the Farrers. In "The Last of Abinger", an essay written during the Second World War, it is some very local and specific relations that seem to concern him.⁷³ The fact that "My Wood", by contrast, understands place partly in terms of the interchange between one whole country and another tends to confirm that in the 1920s, when he is also writing *A Passage for India* and a great deal of journalism, he sees the world more in terms of international relations than during any other phase of his life. Owning property comes across as something that anyone can do, in any time and place. His references to items from the news suggest a very large world which is now, courtesy of the mass media, at his own and his readers' fingertips.

And "My Wood" can also help us see such connections between the large and the small in *A Room with a View*, where they significantly contribute to the comic-serious tone. The essay is about dominion in a big way—that of the British Empire or Bolshevik revolutionaries (in 1926) or (in the 1936 context of *Abinger Harvest*) Nazi Germany—but also about dominion on a minuscule scale, as over Forster's little copse, and as in personal relations with other people:

A boundary protects. But – poor little thing – the boundary ought in its turn to be protected. Noises on the edge of it. Children throw stones. A little more, and then a little more, until we reach the sea.

And perhaps I shall come to this in time. I shall wall in and fence out until I really taste the sweets of property. Enormously stout, endlessly avaricious, pseudo-creative, intensely selfish, I shall weave upon my forehead the quadruple crown of possession until those nasty Bolshies come and thrust me aside into the outer darkness.

("My Wood", pp. 24, 26)

Such a connection between the novel and the essay goes against the universalist critics' firm division of Forster's works into fictional and non-fictional. In both, the small (whether it be Piney Copse or the matter of a bourgeois girl's holiday and choice between bourgeois suitors) is

⁷³ E.M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* ([1951] London, 1972), pp. 353-358.

connected to things which are serious and touch all lives, shaping them for good or ill: to ethics, in other words.

Surrey occasions “My Wood” but is not the subject of it as it is of “West Hackhurst”, or as it is one of the subjects in the novel. The essay contains in miniature the anxieties that would grow into the painful feelings of a bad-tempered, resentful old man in the later memoir, anxieties about property and belonging. The Biblical Ahab, we hear “did not want that vineyard—he only needed it to round off his property”.⁷⁴ Forster is torn between the commitment that led him to write for a socialist newspaper and the desire to cling onto gentry status in an English county setting.

So *A Room with a View* and “My Wood” do show marked differences in their ways of dealing with the same part of England. *A Room with a View* emphasizes the county’s specificity as a place, whereas “My Wood” dwells on issues to do with ownership. But this merely reflects the differences between the novel and the essay as genres, and between the two original target audiences: a broadly middle-class Edwardian novel-reading public, as opposed to a post-war audience of committed left-wingers. From my present point of view, the important common denominator is that both texts, whether in their address to those first audiences, whether in later, expanded contexts during Forster’s lifetime (such as that represented by the inclusion of “My Wood” in *Abinger Harvest*), or whether now, in twenty-first-century contexts, deal with milieu in a way which is partly descriptive and partly allusive. The descriptiveness can to some extent help readers unfamiliar with the milieu concerned. But the allusiveness will have worked most fully only for readers close to Forster’s own sociocultural formation. That is why I have been trying to offer a scholarly aid to reconstructing configurations and significances which such initiated readers—some of the earliest reviewers, for instance—took for granted. My hope is that this will have illuminated the way his more general insights into human relationships and ownership are concretized, and will have reduced the risk of his seeming blandly unsatirical.

⁷⁴ “My Wood”, p. 24.