W. Somerset Maugham’s Letters to Lady Aberconway in the British Library

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I

W. Somerset Maugham (1874–1965), one of the most popular and prosperous writers in his time, author of Of Human Bondage (1915) and Cakes and Ale (1930) that are still widely read, and plays such as Our Betters (1917) and For Services Rendered (1932) that are regularly produced, appealed to his friends’ and acquaintances’ goodwill by asking them to destroy his personal letters in 1957, when he was eighty-three years old.¹ His public request, however, as his biographer Calder points out, had little effect on inducing compliance, as shown by collections of letters in archives in different parts of the world.² The most comprehensive catalogue thus far on unpublished manuscripts and letters that have been preserved is Raymond Toole Stott’s A Bibliography of the Works of W. Somerset Maugham (1973), in which he lists the collections of private letters from Maugham in Yale University Library, the Berg Collection in New York Public Library, A. S. Frere Collection in the House of El Dieff, Inc., Bertram Alanson Collection in Stanford University Library, the Lilly Library Collection in Indiana University, and the Collection of Reginald Turner Letters which includes those from Maugham to Turner, Golding Bright (Maugham’s theatrical agent from 1909 to 1928), G. B. Stern, Hugh Walpole, Paul Dottin, and Karl Pfeiffer.³ However, Stott did not register the letters housed in the Western Manuscripts collection in the British Library,⁴ which contains, besides some business letters from the Society of Authors Archive and Royal Literary Fund, and photocopies of letters from other collections, a series of forty-two original letters and six envelopes from Maugham to Christabel Lady Aberconway from 1920 to 1950s, all in Maugham’s handwriting.

The only letters by Maugham that have been published so far as a collection are those from the author to Lady Juliet Duff.⁵ Other extracts are included in Morgan’s and Hastings’s biographies,⁶ Hassall’s biography of Edward Marsh,⁷ and The Letters of Noël Coward.⁸ These letters present other sides of Maugham that are important for an overall study of his works and his time, as the restrictions the author himself imposed on the printing of unpublished materials only leads to partial, and at time vicious, presentations of him, as Calder argues.⁹

I would like to thank Jeff Kattenhorn of the Department of Manuscripts for patiently answering several of my questions about the letters after my research trip at the British Library.

⁴ See Appendix.
⁵ One letter from the secretary to Maugham on 19 June 1935 was to ask him to pay up £1 for the subscription of 1934, which they had not received (Add. MS. 63414).
¹⁰ Calder, op. cit., p. 325.
The inclusion of the Aberconway papers in the British Library would complement this picture of Maugham, termed by Rothschild as ‘kind, affectionate and considerate’. Although the relationship between Maugham and Lady Aberconway may not be as close as that between Maugham and Lady Juliet Duff, Maugham treated Lady Aberconway in a very different way, teasing and playful. The collection spans a period of thirty years, written on different stationery from several addresses, and all in long hand. Maugham’s biographers have not treated their relationship except mentioning the presence of Lady Aberconway in some of the dinner parties that the author also attended. These letters show that Maugham was keen on keeping a friendship that was warm and responsive; in them is also a more personal side of him that is humorous, intimate, and indulgent.

II

A brief outline of the life of Lady Aberconway, an important patron of the British Museum, will provide the background of Maugham’s correspondence to her. Sixteen years Maugham’s junior, Lady Aberconway was born in 1890, as Christabel Mary Melville Macnaghten to a distinguished Irish family. Her grandfather Elliot Macnaghten was the chairman of the East India Company12 and her father, chief constable Sir Melville Macnaghten, was famous for his report on the Jack the Ripper case.13 In 1910, she married Henry Duncan McLaren, whose father Charles McLaren became Baronet of Bodnant in 1902 and Baron Aberconway in 1911, a title Henry inherited in 1934 upon his father’s death. Christabel McLaren cultivated the friendships of writers and artists. Her relationships with several of them, especially Osnert Sitwell, Samuel Courtauld, and H. G. Wells, turned out to be lifelong, with deep and genuine affection as she remembered them fondly in her memoirs, A Wiser Woman? (1966). It is important for understanding Maugham’s jests in his letters that Lady Aberconway was a renowned social beauty. Virginia Woolf claimed to have flirted with her,14 a more open admirer was William Walton, who dedicated to Lady Aberconway his Viola Concerto (which led him to fame), often interpreted as an expression of his unrequited love towards the lady in question. Though Walton was a womanizer, it would seem that she was never one of his conquests.15 Furthermore, she had a knack of telling amusing anecdotes, as Woolf16 and Marsh17 recorded in their private communications.

Besides her autobiography, Lady Aberconway edited The Women’s Charter Review to Advocate the Rights and Liberties of Women (1913) and was the author of several books: The Divine Gift (1929), A Dictionary of Cat Lovers. XV Century B.C. – XX Century A.D. (1949), The Story of Mr Korah (1954), and Mr Korah and the Monster; the latter two are collaborations with Rex Whistler who did the illustrations.

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13. Lady Aberconway contributed to the Jack the Ripper case by reproducing her father’s notes on the suspects in 1959, which were different from Scotland Yard’s report. She also recalled seeing the police photos of the victim Mary Kelly one Sunday while visiting Scotland Yard, which created chaos at the station, although she was quite unperturbed since she thought the bodies looked more like broken dolls. See Daniel Farson, Jack the Ripper (London, 1972), p. 16, p. 49.
18. Quentin Bell claims that the book was heavily revised by Desmond MacCarthy and the story itself ‘was silly beyond words’, Quentin Bell, Bloomsbury Recalled (London, 1995), p. 136.
In *A Wiser Woman?* Lady Aberconway remembers Maugham as a difficult friend because he would disappear for long periods. She enjoyed his company and his interesting and humorous repartees, of which she recorded one:

‘Willie, have you ever known a man who has had his face lifted?’
‘Yes,’ said Willie, and added with his endearing stammer, ‘and his b-b-bottom also ...’

This conversation occurred one night at dinner when I was staying at Renishaw with Osbert Sitwell. Other guests were coming next day, but that evening there was only Osbert, Willie Maugham, David Horner and myself. Presently, wanting to describe someone’s behaviour, I said: ‘He was tight as a ...’ With Willie Maugham’s remark in my mind, I continued ‘as a lifted bottom’: at that moment the butler came round the screen and gave me rather an old-fashioned look. I wasn’t allowed to forget the incident.\(^{19}\)

She remarked that only once did Maugham fail to find a response to her comment:

He liked women to have pretty clothes and often admired something I was wearing. Yet he was always candid in his comments and on one evening he said to me, ‘That, that is the only unbecoming dress, Christabel, that I have ever seen you wear’.

‘Well, Willie’, I answered, ‘at the moment clothes for me aren’t easy. You, who were a doctor, surely must be aware that I’m going to have a baby in a few months’ time?’

Not a sound came from Willie’s lips though they moved as if he were stammering.\(^{20}\)

She also recalled that it was through her introduction that Maugham solicited the help of Dr Leahy to cure his stammer, which enabled Maugham to give the broadcast on his escape from France to England, most probably ‘Escape from the Riviera’ that was recorded on 10 July 1940.\(^{21}\) Morgan notes that Maugham recommended Leahy to Fred Bason in a letter on 22 September 1943, when the latter was suffering from a stammer after an injury, and that Leahy also treated King George VI.\(^{22}\)

Hastings records Lady Aberconway’s introduction, and states that it was the only time Maugham sought help to cure his stammer; nevertheless, Kanin recalls that Maugham did take ‘lessons’ with another therapist, Dr Lionel Logue, King George VI’s speech coach since 1926.\(^{23}\)

Over the years, from 1959 to 1961, Christabel Aberconway presented to the British Museum series of letters from her famous friends, including well-known public figures such as Clive Bell, E. M. Forster, Duncan Grant, Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson, Siegfried Sassoon, and Virginia and Leonard Woolf, that have become the Supplementary Aberconway Papers that make up six volumes (Add. MS. 70775–70779).\(^{24}\) Maugham’s letters are collected in volume I (Add. MS. 70775).

\section*{III}

Maugham’s correspondence in the Supplementary Aberconway Papers started in 1921. It is habitual with Maugham that he did not date his letter diligently; sometimes he only put the day of the week, most of the times with only the date and month, without any reference to the year. Only a few envelopes were preserved. I follow the estimated years annotated by the British Library in pencil, except for the first letter.

\footnotesize

\(^{19}\) Aberconway, op. cit., pp. 79-80.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 80.
\(^{21}\) Calder, op. cit., p. 277.
\(^{22}\) Morgan, op. cit., p. 327, p. 442.
The letter concerned, with the address printed of 18 Half Moon Street, could be dated as early as 1919. In it Maugham was inviting Christabel McLaren, as Mrs MacLaren [sic], to luncheon with him the week after on Monday 24 November when he finished with the parties that filled him that week. It was in 1919 that Monday fell on 24 November, thus situating Maugham at 18 Half Moon Street as early as 1919. At the same time, as he dated his letter ‘Monday’, it would point to the fact that it was written on 17 November 1919. It is not clear in the biographies when Maugham began keeping the flat at 18 Half Moon Street. Cordell mentions vaguely that ‘After his financial success in 1908 he moved to Mayfair, and at various times occupied an apartment or a house in Dover Street, Mount Street, Chesterfield Street, Wyndham Place, Half-Moon Street, and Bryanston Square’. Morgan writes about Maugham’s flat at the same address around the time of 1928, as a place for him to stay when he went to London. Calder notes that when finding 6 Chesterfield Street too small for a family Maugham bought 2 Wyndham Place in the spring of 1919, to which he moved with his wife and daughter a few months later. However, from this letter to Lady Aberconway, it appears that Maugham had the flat at 18 Half Moon Street much earlier, and either simultaneously with the other abodes or took lease again subsequently.

In the rest of the letter, Maugham made reference to the chilly weather on the Welsh Hills, surely referring to the Bodnant Estate that belonged to the McLarens on the River Conwy in Wales, comparing it to the cold wind Maugham endured while playing golf (indifferently, as he noted) at the weekend. He made an observation of how we make ourselves go through unpleasantness in the process of pretending to amuse ourselves. He signed ‘W. S. Maugham’.

Apparently, the friendship then progressed, albeit slowly. When Maugham invited Lady Aberconway on 25 February to the first night of The Circle (3 March 1921), he took the liberty to call her ‘Beautiful lady’, and appealed to her to accept the invitation because he was going to get her seats in a strategic position where everyone would be able to see her, which in turn would give him a successful first night. If we date the first letter 1919 instead of 1921, it would better explain the progression of their friendship. Lady Aberconway eventually became ‘My dear’ in 1931 and Maugham signed with a warmer ‘Willie’, wishing that he had spent the evening with her instead of dining out with doctors, who ate and drank so much as he had never seen before. He invited her to a sausage and mash party at Barbara Back’s at 4 Park Square West after one of his plays, and signed himself Wilhelm. His playful tones continued in a short note, almost a billet-doux:

[May 1934]
5, Portland Place, W.1.
Saturday

Beautiful
I shall count the hours till 6 P.M. next Wednesday.

Bless you
W.M.

I hope you still are [with an arrow from ‘Beautiful’].

26 Hastings, op. cit., p. 373.
27 Morgan, op. cit., p. 312.
29 According to Morgan (op. cit., p. 170), Maugham kept the lease of 6 Chesterfield St from April 1911 to March 1919. Then, in November, he would be occupying 18 Half Moon Street and 2 Wyndham Place at the same time.
30 Add. 70775, f. 44.
31 Ibid., f. 46.
32 Ibid., f. 55.
33 Ibid., f. 60. All quotations of Maugham’s letters from the Supplementary Aberconway Papers appear with the permission of United Agents LLP on behalf of The Royal Literary Fund.
Throughout the years, Maugham called her other endearing names, such as ‘Christabel my sweet’, ‘Christabel dear’, ‘Christabel my pretty’, ‘My beloved Christabel’, ‘Angel of Light’, ‘Dearest Christabel’, ‘Bright Angel’. Besides teasing Lady Aberconway about her beauty, Maugham also made jokes. In the letter written on 15 October 1936,\(^{34}\) he assumed a formal tone, calling her ‘Dear Madam’ and announcing the delivery of her ladyship’s order. Most probably he was referring to the title that her husband inherited in 1934. The playfulness remains years later, in a letter written after 1957:

\[\text{The Dorchester}\]
\[\text{London}\]
\[\text{Telephone Mayfair 8888}\]
\[26\text{ Sept}\]

Bright Angel

Your note has put me all in a dither. I have been making tentative approaches to you through such members of the aristocracy & gentry as I have been privileged to meet since I came back, but they were so secretive that I imagined either that you had retired to a nunnery or were in an advanced stage of pregnancy; & in the first case could not & in the second would not see me.

But I am staying here till early in December & if you ever cared to ask me to tea (I don’t take milk or sugar & don’t eat anything between lunch and dinner) I should be delighted to come.

Or would you like to come & have an atrocious lunch here.

My love to you

Willie\(^{35}\)

There is a more serious side to their relationship. Two of the letters show that Lady Aberconway was following Maugham’s publications closely and wrote him her thoughts on them, to which Maugham was grateful.

\[\text{Midland Hotel, Manchester [crossed out]}\]
\[11\text{ Portland Place}\]

Christabel my sweet

What a charming letter you wrote & how clever you are! For of course I only chose an actress as my heroine because it made my point more plain to one; so far as I can judge, you are the only person who has seen it; to wit, that we all have at least two personalities, which act & react upon one another; & we have all a private self & a public self, so that to a greater or a less extent what I have said about Julia to my mind applies to all women, & as you justly remark to not a few men.

I am here for the revival of my play & must go to Newcastle next week. Do you think I look upon this as a treat?

If so, you err.

Bless you — & thank you again for reading my book with so much comprehension.

Willie\(^{36}\)

\(^{34}\) Ibid., f. 67.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., f. 90.
\(^{36}\) Ibid., f. 68.
It was in April 1937 that Maugham went to Manchester and Newcastle for the revival of his play *The Constant Wife*.\(^{37}\) The book that he was talking about was *Theatre*, published on 3 March. Lady Aberconway must have read it when it came out and wrote to Maugham immediately. Although Maugham writes about techniques in numerous articles and prefaces, he rarely comments on the content of his works, and usually he disliked listening to or reading what others said about him.\(^{38}\) His response to Lady Aberconway about the character Julia Lambert in *Theatre*, though brief, is of interest. Wescott points out that it is unfortunate that Maugham’s works are often dismissed as lacking depth because of the simplicity in style — which must not be mistaken as superficiality — that the writer has cultivated with much discipline throughout the years. He argues that Maugham gave serious thought to the subjects he treated and there are many levels of meanings in his stories, which are left for the readers to exploit. On a rare occasion Maugham was willing to listen to Wescott’s analysis of *Christmas Holiday* (1939), to which he answered:

‘Certainly I had those things in the back of my mind while I was writing it. But if I had insisted on them I should have spoiled my story. It is not the business of a novelist to tell his readers what they are to think of his characters and his plot. If you want your work of fiction to be read, and you have some point that you wish to make, you must bring it in discreetly. Your reader may not take your meaning, or it may not interest him. You must let him read for his pleasure.’\(^{39}\)

Maugham’s answer to Lady Aberconway demonstrates that the creation of Julia Lambert was an exploration of the underlying personalities that we all possess and of how we manage to draw some sort of harmony out of them, and most interesting, instead of the habitual reluctance to discuss his works, he answered Lady Aberconway most warmly. The other letter in which another work of the author was mentioned followed again closely the publication date. *Catalina* was printed on 19 August 1948 and Maugham replied to Lady Aberconway’s comments on 10 September.\(^{40}\)

In a few letters Maugham mentioned activities that he was engaged in at the time, such as his recordings for Columbia and a refusal to write an article that was required of him solely for his fame,\(^{41}\) or his lecture on Kipling.\(^{42}\) It was in one letter on the last day of an unspecified year, between 1949 and 1953, that Maugham talked about his emotional state:

Villa Mauresque,
St. Jean-Cap Ferrat,
A.M.

31 December.
Dearest Christabel

My last letter of the old year.

I was deeply touched by the warm & wonderful letter I received from you just as I was leaving England, & if I hadn’t written before to thank you for it, it is because since I got back here I have been depressed & not very well, depressed perhaps only because not very well; but I must tell you now how much I love you for having written to me with such a moving tenderness. I won’t say anything more about it for fear that I shall say either too much or too little.

To-morrow I pack up to go to Rome & I am looking forward to it. I haven’t been there for years except for a day or two en passant, & I think it will be pleasant


\(^{39}\) Wescott, op. cit., pp. 74-5.

\(^{40}\) Add. 70775, f. 75.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., f. 77.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., f. 74.
to stay there just to be there, seeing this, that & the other as the fancy moves one, &
without the feeling that I can only stay just so long because I have to be somewhere
else for some reason by a certain day. I don’t know why, except perhaps because of
my stay in America & then my stay in London, that I hanker for a bellyful of art. And
though I don’t want anything really for my house I want to saunter through the curio
& antique shops on the chance of finding something I wish to buy. And then there’s
the opera: it’s not very good, but Italian opera in Italy has a flavour & a charm that it
has nowhere else, I think because the audience know whatever they are seeing so well
& are so childishly delighted if some one sings a favourite aria as they think it should
be sung, & so clamorously vexed if on the contrary it is sung badly. I remember the
groan of anguish that went through the house when Gilda in Rigoletto just missed her
high note, and the gasp of apprehension when later she had to take it again & the roar
of delight when she got it. I think one of the pleasing things about Italian opera in
Italy is that they don’t take it solemnly, as we take all music, but with a gay delight.

Here it has been cold & rainy, & the hills are topped with snow. Nothing in the
garden except narcissus & here & there a mimosa just starting to bloom. My friends,
intimate acquaintances rather, grow older & older, always kind, always hospitable,
but with never an amusing thing to say or an unusual thought to utter.

My love to you.
Willie

The melancholy conveyed is touching. Although Maugham did not unburden his mind it can
ded from the letter that he was moved by Lady Aberconway’s concerns about him.
Their relationship, even if not as close as some of Maugham’s friends’, went beyond mere
acquaintanceship of moving in the same circle, as it appears to be in Maugham’s biographies.
The letter mentioned previously (26 September) in which Maugham joked about Lady
Aberconway being either pregnant or in a nunnery shows that he did try to seek her out when
he was in London and was not indifferent when he could not find her.

The letter of the last day of the year was not the only occasion on which Maugham mentioned
how charmingly Lady Aberconway wrote to him. On 21 June 1954 Maugham could only write a
very short note because he had been writing all day long, he ‘sweet-talked’ himself out by saying that
Christabel’s letter was by far the nicest from among his hundreds of correspondences.44 It seems that
one of Lady Aberconway’s charms was her ability to soothe her friends when they were distressed.
She mentions an incident with H. G. Wells: when she went one day to visit him she found him
completely dejected because of the rejection of a script to which he had devoted a lot of time and
effort. When she left him, he was in a good mood, having laughed so much that tears ran down his
cheeks.45 Interestingly, Maugham sent a letter to Lady Juliet Duff on the same day as the letter to
Lady Aberconway, typewritten, and asked for forgiveness for doing so: ‘I hope you will forgive me
for writing to you on the typewriter, but the volume of letters, cables and telegrams has been such,
that it is the only way I can cope with it’.46 Perhaps Maugham did mean that Christabel’s letter was
by far the nicest.

After Syrie’s (Maugham’s ex-wife) death on 25 July 1955, Lady Aberconway must have written
to Maugham to give her condolences, but Maugham, in Salzburg, replied in August that he was
not sorry about Syrie’s death at all, and was vehement about the ‘lying, deceit, dishonesty’, which
caused a ‘miserable and lonely death’. He thought at the end ‘truth, decency, straightforwardness
pay better’.47 In winter 1957, knowing that Lady Aberconway was going to the Riviera next spring,

41 Ibid., f. 78.
42 Ibid., f. 81.
43 See Aberconway, op. cit., p. 74.
44 Rothschild, op. cit., p. 69.
45 Add. 70775, f. 82. Maugham’s anger towards Syrie Maugham grew stronger with years, which led him to write
the notorious ‘Looking Back’ (1962) and caused him to lose many friends.
Maugham invited her to go over to his villa, and repeated what was not unlike the narrator’s words to Peter Melrose in ‘The Voice of the Turtle’ (1935), written twenty-two years before: ‘I must warn you that I lead a very quiet, dull life, & can offer you no whirl of gaiety, but only a comfortable bed & three meals a day’.

In the last undated letter in the collection, Maugham mentioned a button of the eighteenth century, which he hoped was once worn by a beautiful lady, that he had sent to her.

IV

It would not be unreasonable to suppose that Maugham wrote Lady Aberconway more letters than the ones presented to the British Museum, because of the gaps in between and the undiminished warm tones and indulgence on Maugham’s part. The two letters in which Lady Aberconway commented on Maugham’s books show that she was following his works closely; both letters of reply from Maugham were written within a month of the books’ publication. It would thus seem likely that she wrote to him about his other works; the same with another letter in which Maugham thanked her for his birthday present, that Lady Aberconway probably sent him one every year. Christabel Aberconway had also given Maugham at least two of her books, The Story of Mr Korah and A Dictionary of Cat Lovers, and Rev. E. Cobham Brewer’s A Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, referring to an old lady’s dress in her inscription: ‘To Willie S. M. from Christabel. 21st October 1933. (an amende honorable for an old lady’s dress ... p. 40 ...’), which are now in the King’s School’s library. Not knowing the exact edition of the Dictionary it is difficult to conjecture what Lady Christabel was referring to. However, from what she wrote in her memoirs about Maugham’s comment on her dress and the fact that her fifth child, Christopher Melville McLaren, was born on 15 April 1934, it would not be unreasonable to surmise that the incident happened before October 1933, when she was forty-four (‘old lady’) and three to four months pregnant, which is still relatively unnoticeable, and that she was referring to the phrase ‘amende honorable’ in Brewer’s Dictionary, making fun of an occasion which she still remembered in her old age.

This series of correspondence shows a friendship that is kind and tender, at times teasing, always playful and without pressure or exigencies from either side. They reveal a much closer relationship than Maugham’s biographies, in which the name of Lady Aberconway appears only as a fellow dinner guest, show. Maugham seemed to enjoy her company and letters, and his own letters are full of humour and wit. Maugham’s comment on Theatre in response to Lady Aberconway’s reading is useful for future discussion of the novel. Furthermore, by revising the date of the first letter in the collection Maugham’s address at 18 Half Moon Street can be put to an earlier year, which in turn introduces the possibility of Maugham keeping two lodgings at the same time. The holdings of Maugham’s letters in the British Library should be considered as important additions for the study of the author’s life and works, especially when most of Maugham’s letters are lodged and dispersed in various libraries in the United States.

48 Ibid., f. 84.
49 Ibid., f. 90
50 Ibid., f. 80.
51 King’s School, Books Given by W. Somerset Maugham ([Canterbury, 1966]), p. 9, p. 31. (BL, 2785.ct.33).
52 Aberconway, op. cit., p.80.
Appendix

W. Somerset Maugham’s Letters in the British Library

Originals:
- Supplementary Aberconway Papers, vol. i, ff. 43-91 (Add. MS. 70775).
- William Somerset Maugham to Arthur Llewelyn Roberts (Loan 96 RLF 1/2982/18 and Loan 96 RLF 1/2782/28) – Roberts was secretary of the Royal Literary Fund 1884-1919.
- William Somerset Maugham to the Secretary of the Literary Fund (Loan 96 RLF 1/3522/9).
- Vol. cxxix (Add. MS. 81747). Letters to Robert Baldwin Ross from William Somerset Maugham – Ross was the literary executor of Oscar Wilde.

Photocopies:
- 3 Autograph Letters Signed and Typed Letter Signed to ‘Eddie’, 3 photocopies (RP. 4309/2) – Edward Marsh was a friend and proofread Maugham’s works since *Don Fernando*.
- Autograph Letter Signed to W. M. Colles, microfiche (RP. 3630/3) – Colles was Maugham’s literary agent 1898-1905.
- J. M. Dent & Son’s Correspondence with/relating to Maugham, W. Somerset, 6 photocopies (RP. 6544/18) – J. M. Dent was Everyman’s publisher.
- Letters to W. N. Colles, 13 photocopies (RP. 1230).
- Typed Letter Signed to Mr Clodd, photocopies (RP. 9340/4).