



Berwick Educational Association
'Howards End and the Condition of England'
A lecture by Dr Richard Moore
Friday 2nd March 2018 10am -1.00pm
William Elder Building, Castlegate, Berwick

Howards End is a novel about the condition of England. But if this sounds dull, be reassured that it is brim-full of comedy and is a work of timeless, not time-bound, significance. Like much of Forster's work its aim is to widen our imaginative sympathies and indeed many critics have remarked on the process by which it "widens the circle" established at the opening. This is in line with Forster's literary philosophy. We know from *Aspects of the Novel* that, for him, 'Expansion is the idea the novelist must cling to - not completion. Not rounding off but opening out'. *Howards End* develops in this way. We start when the author throws us, apparently casually, a piece of flotsam with which we 'may as well begin'. Gradually the fragments of letters, the 'telegrams and anger', the confused events, muddles and misapprehensions resolve themselves into a current of ideas. They are ideas which build up, through sustained imagery of seas and tides, to the central issues set forth in a key chapter half-way through the book. This is the chapter where Margaret and Helen discuss Mr. Wilcox's proposal of marriage and its full importance will be brought out at our study-session.

The name of the house is significant. On one level it marks the last flourishing – the end – of the Edwardian rural idyll but the house also stretches forth tendrils – like the roots of its symbolic tree – across England to the sea, so in one sense it is the end-point for a spiritual, moral and cultural journey. Ironically, most of the Wilcox family who live at Howards End are worldly materialists, though Mrs. Wilcox is the upholder of the older rural values. She sees in Margaret Schlegel a spirit who might nurture the place, rather than transforming it. Meanwhile, the modern world of speed and greed – symbolised by a destructive motor-car with a sinister chauffeur – suggests the advance of a restless modernity.

The message of the novel is of the need to connect, linking poetry with the prose, reason with passion and reaching out to each other across social, spiritual and cultural divides. The idea again is of a merging of currents, and the sea is here a major symbol. Soon after Mrs. Wilcox's death, we read:

“Paul and his mother, ripple and great wave, had flowed into her (Margaret’s) life, and ebbed out of it for ever. The ripple had left no traces behind; the wave had strewn at her feet fragments from the unknown. A curious seeker, she stood for a while at the verge of the sea that tells so little, but tells a little, and watched the outgoing of this last tremendous tide.”

Here the last tremendous tide is presumably a reference to the flowing out into death. But this is not the end. The sea here becomes identified with the great ‘Unseen’, the eternal, the infinite, as opposed to the Seen, the time-bound, the limited and the transient. Dickens in *Dombey and Son* explores similar contrasts. He also makes clear that what *some* hear of the sea’s message, others fail to catch. This is because of their limited imagination and percipience and their deafness to deeper intimations.

In his early writing Forster tended towards fancy and fantasy. In one of his stories a girl turns into a tree. In another the god Pan sweeps through a Tuscan valley where a group of middle-class English people are partaking of a picnic. *Howards End* is more rooted in reality but the sense of a spiritual dimension does infuse it. Meanwhile, at the other end of the scale we are offered fragmentary broken dialogue that sometimes prefigures T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. The young clerk Leonard Bast and his mistress Jackie are a dispossessed modern urban couple. Leonard aspires to poetry and spirituality yet is harassed (for instance) not just by the need to earn a living wage but also by the loss of his ugly old umbrella, left behind when he attends a concert as part of his cultural awakening. Throughout the novel the real and the surreal, the sublime and the ordinary jostle and comment on each other. It is a rich brew and one that still has much to say. It speaks still to our fractured, rather dysfunctional society as the urban encroaches, the Internet reigns, and spiritual and humane social values retreat or are lost.

The cost of the study morning is £9 including refreshments. All are welcome, and no previous knowledge is assumed.

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(Howards End)