

Foreword

When I first began to read this book, 91 years after its original publication in 1917, I was astonished that it had been one of the greatest bestsellers of its day, and a cult book ever after. It is not an easy novel. Its satire is gentle, its descriptive passages are demanding, its dialogues by no means succinct. Yet it instantly made its author celebrated not just in literary circles, but among an almost universal audience of educated readers.

Perhaps, I thought, as I plunged gamely into its fifty chapters, it was the character of its author that made it so popular. George Norman Douglas was decidedly one of a kind. The son of a Scottish father and a German mother, born in 1868 in Habsburg Austria, educated mostly in Wilhelmine Germany, he began adult life as a British diplomat, learned, charming, highly cultivated and to all appearances a characteristically polished English gentleman of the late Edwardian era.

But he did not last long in His Majesty's Foreign Service: he became indiscreetly embroiled with a lady of the Russian court, and was quietly released from his duties. This was a portent, for scandal was to pursue him all his life. Having married and divorced young, produced two sons and indulged in innumerable affairs with women, in mid-life he became predominantly a pederast. More than that, he also became a true-blue, whole-hog hedonist in the classic Grecian mode, pursuing his loves of art, nature, learning, women and young men through many climes and countries until he ended up on that already notorious island of delights, Capri.

Capri is the real subject of this novel – its central character, in fact. *South Wind* is a *roman à clef* in the profoundest sense, because, while many of its human characters are indeed modelled on real people, the whole of its *mise-en-scène* is a parody of a real place. As Douglas himself said, any character

must be remodelled before it becomes material for fiction – it must be “licked into shape”. In *South Wind* Capri is delicately licked into shape as the imaginary island of Nepenthe.

The story occupies twelve days on Nepenthe, and Douglas makes no effort to disguise the factual origins of the setting. He had been living on Capri on and off since 1904, had published several travel books and made himself the best known of the motley expatriates who had settled on the island. Capri had been famous for its lubricious goings-on at least since the days of the Emperor Tiberius, but it was largely because of Douglas’s legendary presence that between the two world wars the place was to become a byword for cosmopolitan free living, where conventions could be ignored, scandals forgotten, sexual aberrations tolerated and eccentricities admired. The rich and famous flocked there, together with escapists and rascals of every kind.

Douglas’s Nepenthe was the same, only more so, and given an extra flavour of comic satire. We see it largely through the mild eyes of a British colonial bishop, stopping off for a few days on the way home from his African diocese, and the south wind of the title, the sirocco of so many memoirs and travelogues, is suggested as a sort of *genius loci* – a warm, capricious, sensual spirit that bathes and perfumes the island in its passage. The south wind and the Anglican prelate of Bampopo are opposites, and the book tells us of the one’s subtly transforming effect upon the other – which had been, in many ways, Capri’s real-life effect upon Norman Douglas.

Of course the sirocco wins, and in the course of the book’s fifty chapters we watch the bishop being subtly liberated from his English inhibitions and inoculated with the serum of hedonism. The agents of his treatment are the marvellously varied inhabitants of the place, simplest superstitious fisherfolk to exquisitely cultured connoisseurs, scamps and saints and weirdos who are themselves moulded by the wind, and by the

brooding and sometimes ominous presence of a Vesuvian volcano on the nearby mainland.

Exactly fifty chapters, one notes. The more deeply I explored the nature of this novel, the more I realized the infinite care with which it had been fashioned. Earlier reviewers complained that it had no plot, but they were surely wrong. The plot concerns the conflict between philosophical and aesthetic opposites, and is as carefully worked out as a detective story. All members of the cast have their important parts to play in a drama that is often puzzling and sometimes farcical, but which is never without meaning and is often profoundly beautiful.

So I came to realize, too, why *South Wind* was a phenomenal seller in its day, and has been so widely read ever since. Douglas's earlier books had been critical successes, but commercial flops: it was *South Wind* that made him internationally famous. No doubt the book's developing cult owed something to the glamorous notoriety of its author, which was fostered by a clamorous audience of what we would now call "groupies". Some of its allure is certainly its hint of secret allusions – how often, when its male characters speak of young women, are they thinking of young boys, and what is the ultimately emancipated bishop up to when he disappears from his farewell party to look at the moonlight with young Denis?

But as those generations of readers had discovered before me, the fascination of *South Wind* lies not in the nature of its author, but in the nature of itself. It is a fascinating book, in the original senses of the adjective – spell-binding, mesmeric, and sometimes disturbingly prophetic. The south wind of its title affects its readers today as subtly as it affected the Bishop in the fictional long ago, and deposits in the mind an opiate sort of impression. We leave it slightly drugged and mystified, yet somehow slightly more aware of things than when we started.

South Wind is a very kind work, I think, in its duplicitous way. As the innocently Protestant Bishop of Bampopo says to the worldly Catholic Monsignor in its closing pages: “Your smile, Don Francesco, will follow me across the ocean.” But then as Douglas himself commented, the Monsignor was “the only respectable person in the whole crowd”.

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