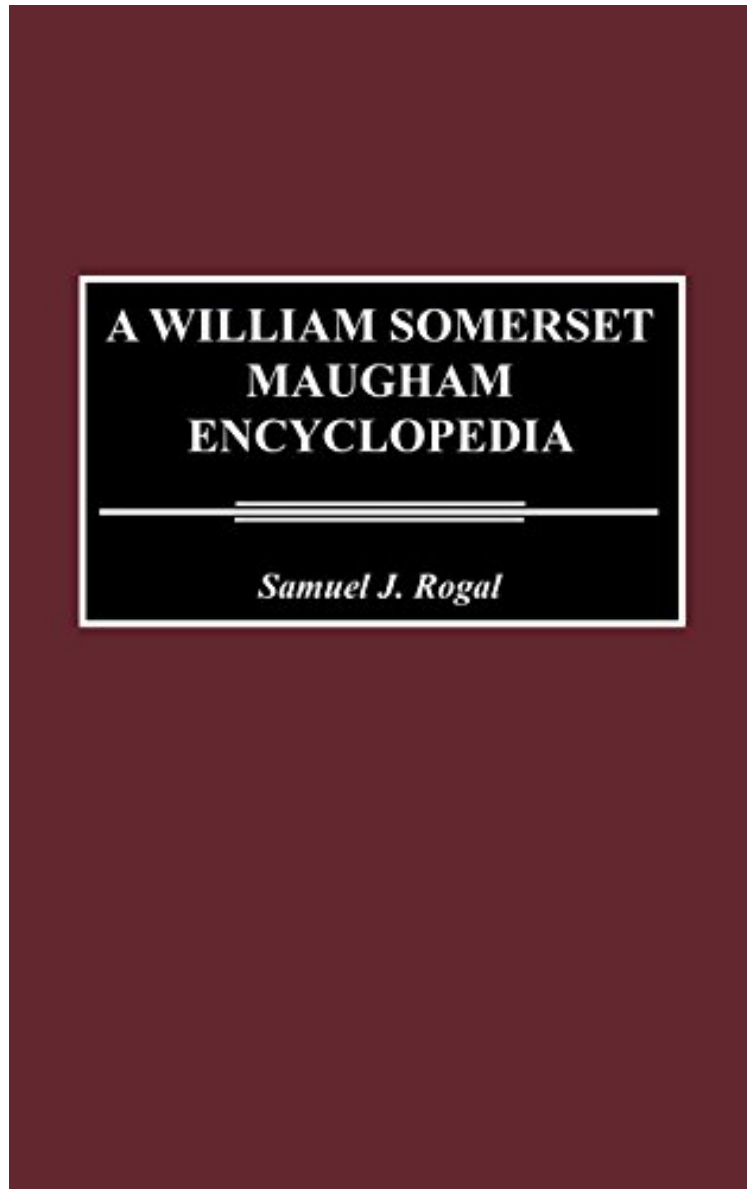


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A William Somerset Maugham Encyclopedia (Music Reference Collection; 60)

Samuel Rogal

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Samuel Rogal : A William Somerset Maugham Encyclopedia (Music Reference Collection; 60) before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A William Somerset Maugham Encyclopedia (Music Reference Collection; 60):

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Definitely not worth the monstrous price it is sold for

By Alexander Arsov
Samuel J. Rogal
A William Somerset Maugham Encyclopedia
Greenwood Press, Hardback, 1997.8vo. xviii, 376 pp. Preface by Samuel J. Rogal [vi-ix]. General Bibliography [pp. 323-333]. Index [pp. 335-376]. Table of Contents: Preface Chronology Encyclopedia General Bibliography Index-----'Review originally written in October 2009. This is a very useful book in many aspects with rather few but very grave defects. Hence three star rating. What follows is an attempt for explanation of this somewhat contradictory situation at first glance. As a quick and easy way to obtain basic information about many persons and places related to Somerset Maugham, the book is an excellent resource. It contains a number of entries about more or less everybody Maugham ever knew or mention in one way or another in his writings as well as basic historical information about the numerous places all over the world he visited. Every entry has a separate bibliography with the last names of the authors only; more details about the sources can be obtained by looking at the General Bibliography in the end of the book. The so called Chronology encompasses the time from the birth of Somerset Maugham's grandfather in 1788 until the death of his favourite nephew, Robin Maugham, in 1981. Samuel J. Rogal writes in a fine style and most of the time he manages to sound agreeably disinterested, and occasionally he even achieves a very good imitation of that illusory quality called objectivity. But he also suffers from the general prejudices of most persons who attempt to write about Maugham: his putative place below the great masters of the English literature, his fabulous wealth which did not bring him the recognition he so much yearned for, his homosexuality and his misogyny, their overwhelming influence on his writing. 'The mixture as before' as Maugham himself might have chuckled; the same old story about him, his writings and his personality. These things have been repeated over and over again for great many years and, though all of them are rooted in truth, all of them are usually and grossly exaggerated too. In his interesting preface, Mr Rogal makes a very shrewd remark that Maugham's affection for rather worthless persons all his life did little for his reputation. I think this is why Somerset Maugham is so often and so greatly underestimated as writer: because of his personal life; and because people's envy acquire immense proportions when confronted with such a wealth of money, independence of character and lavish lifestyle for more than a half century. I daresay such a shameful attitude of those who don't like him or his books is only too natural, but that doesn't make it less silly and worthless. I still can't see why a writer should be judged, not by what he wrote, but by the way he lived, by his sexual orientation or by his opinions. Why should any artist be judged at all indeed? If he and his works have some meaning to you, enjoy them, profit from them, do whatever you want; if not, skip him, leave him to the others who like him and that's all. It is interesting to speculate about this or that incident that might have given Maugham an idea about this character or that story, but I think we would do better not to ascribe too much importance to all that. Especially, when we talk of fiction. In general, Mr Rogal has more or less positive opinion of Maugham, he writes with sympathy and understanding and his style is pleasant to read. Together with the highly informative entries and the index in the end, the book is extremely useful for finding various things related to Maugham in a very short time and makes an interesting read. So much for the positive sides of the book. The most disappointing part of the encyclopedia is surely the one concerned with Maugham's works. Virtually every book, pamphlet, a short story, a novel or a play he ever wrote has separate entry and that's really fine. Mr Rogal has given general history of publication, although in many instances he could certainly have been more detailed, and some of his background information about Maugham's short stories firmly based on real people and events is agreeable, The Letter for example (by the way, Rain and The Pool are examples of the opposite, where Mr Rogal's treatment is perfunctory and quite unsatisfying). But the greatest mistake, in my opinion, that the author of the encyclopedia makes it to give the contents of all Maugham's works in great detail. Now, for non-fiction books - essays, travel writings and such - this is very useful for giving you a general idea what you can find in these books; but when we come to fiction - novels, short stories, plays - nothing can be of greater disservice than telling plots in inordinate length. For some novels and plays these narratives run for more than a page and make exceedingly tedious read. Moreover, it is perfectly pointless: if you have read a short story or a novel but you can remember nothing but its name, it is really nice to read a brief description of the plot to refresh your memory (and if your mind is still blank, you'd better read the short story or the novel in question all over again) and if you have never read a certain work of fiction by Maugham, the last thing you would like to know is its detailed plot, together with the otherwise surprising and unexpected ending and even some of the best lines of the main characters. Mr Rogal would have done much better if he had shortened these descriptions a great deal so as not to spoil the pleasure of those who have yet to read them. Furthermore, he could have given more historical information about these works and how they came to be written, especially since there's a lot about that scattered in various prefaces and non-fiction books by Maugham. It would also have been very nice if Mr Rogal, without writing a bibliography of course, had taken more pains to elucidate the problem with different prefaces to many of his works Maugham wrote through the years; this is very important indeed, since his prefaces almost always offer a great deal of important biographical and bibliographical information, not to mention the fact that they are written in the same fine style and make an absorbing read. The other grave fault of the encyclopedia is the most trivial one: factual errors. Here are some examples I have noticed on prima vista the first time I went through the encyclopedia. God only knows (and it's doubtful if even He does) how many more are there of which I am unaware. For example, the short story "The Wash Tub" was first published in 1929, not 1919. If this is just

a misprint, the case of *The Point of Honour* certainly is not. Mr Rogal tells us that it is a short story that was first published in the travel book *"On a Chinese Screen"* (1922) and later in the short story collection *"Creatures of Circumstance"* (1947). But that has nothing to do with the truth. Indeed, it is true that both books contain parts with that title, but a simple comparison shows conclusively that the short story in *"Creatures of Circumstance"* is a completely different piece from the chapter in *"On a Chinese Screen"* which bears the same title. Nor is this true for the short story *Mirage*. It was first published in a magazine form in 1929 under the same title, one year later it was included in the travel book *"The Gentleman in the Parlour"* as a nameless chapter, and it was finally published under its original title in *"The Complete Short Stories"* (1951). The short sketch *"Mirage"* that appeared in *"On A Chinese Screen"* (1922) is a completely different piece from the short story with the same name. Obviously, all that Mr Rogal did in these cases was just a brief comparison between the tables of contents of both books. Such carelessness is unacceptable and unforgivable. Other mistakes, albeit not that grave, include the short story *Mabel* which, as it seems from its entry, is supposed to have been written in 1951 and first published in *The Complete Short Stories*. Nothing is farther from the truth. *Mabel* was published in book form as early as 1930 when it was incorporated into the travel book *"The Gentleman in the Parlour"*. Later it was reprinted word by word in the collected edition of Maugham's short stories. It should also be noted that neither in the entry for *Cousin Amy* nor in that for *The Luncheon* is mentioned that the latter is extensively re-written version of the former. To err is only too human of course, but in such endeavour as encyclopedia entirely dedicated to one of the most unique phenomena of the twentieth century literature such errors should not have gone unnoticed. Despite its grave faults, especially the plot descriptions of mammoth length and rather silly errors here and there, *A William Somerset Maugham Encyclopedia* by Samuel J. Rogal remains a book every admirer of the great writer ought to have in his or her library. It is fast and easy, if not always entirely accurate, source of information about Maugham's life, work and time. We could only hope, unlikely as it may be, that in not too distant future a new expanded edition with corrected errors will appear. I am saying "expanded" because there is always something related to Maugham that has never been mentioned before but deserves to be; for example an entry on Spinoza would be very nice, and quite to the point since in *The Summing Up Maugham* states flatly that his acquaintance with the writings of the great philosopher was one of the signal experiences in his life. And what a life that was! Afterthoughts [2010/11]. I am not going to pretend that I have read every single entry in the encyclopedia, but I certainly have read most of them. Looking back on the above now, it seems to me that I was somewhat too generous with the stars. Apart from the exasperating sloppiness with several short stories and their different versions already discussed in quite enough detail, what detracts most from Mr Rogal's encyclopedia is that he sometimes allows himself personal opinions. I won't deny that some of them are surprising and rather pleasant to read, like his largely positive attitude to Maugham's last two novels which almost every other writer about Maugham is only too eager to degrade in a grand manner. It is worth noting that Mr Rogal has the rare common sense to point out that Maugham's notorious late memoirs, *"Looking Back"* (1962), contain much more than his candid portrait of Syrie (once his wife) that generated quite a scandal at the time. Though seldom, Mr Rogal can also be shrewd, almost perceptive. His comments on Maugham's famous discussion of homosexuality (regarding El Greco) are worth considering. Maugham's hypothesis, in a nutshell, is that El Greco was homosexual and it was this which gave him a warped view of the world and prevented him from ever achieving the greatest heights of genius. Mr Rogal's hypothesis is that Maugham might well have reflected here on his own failure to achieve the greatest possible realisation of himself as a writer. Now, this is very tenuous and highly speculative stuff, but I venture to suggest that Mr Rogal was more wrong than right. He may have a point though, if a small one. It is well-known that Maugham never really considered himself a great writer - several times he all but said so and the critics were eager to take his words at their face value - and his remark about his position at the first row of the second rank is famous. I have come to think that he probably did mean it, and it fits with his natural modesty which is so often overlooked. Mr Rogal's opinions and his audacity to express them here and there often verge on disaster. They range from frankly misleading ones, deliberately or not, to wild speculations with neither any ground for nor any explanations of. Few examples follow below. In the entry called *"The Beauty and the Professor"* Mr Rogal tells us the interesting bit of information that this is the title of a lecture on Kant's philosophy delivered by Maugham at Columbia University, New York, on 2 November 1950. Then he gives a short and superficial summary as well as one highly misleading opinion: "Maugham appears more interested in Kant the eighteenth-century man than in his philosophy." This is nonsense, not to mention that Mr Rogal doesn't even makes it clear that the lecture was later revised and included in the collection of essays *"The Vagrant Mood"* (1952) under the title *Reflections on a Certain Book*. The piece is one of the most brilliant among Maugham's essays and, for once, the biographical content is by no means the major part of it. Besides, the fascinating sketch of Kant's life and personality are used supremely well to illuminate his philosophy. The latter, together with a number of Maugham's stirring reflections, occupy almost the whole essay. One wonders if Mr Rogal ever read it. In the entry of *"Henry James"*, after fairly well done summary of Maugham's terrifically dismissive attitude, Mr Rogal expresses the following and very high-handed opinion: "perhaps only envy kept Maugham's mouth open and pen wet." What was there in Henry James that Somerset Maugham should have envied him? James' complete failure as dramatist? James' tortured, convoluted, turgid, twisted and far from lucid writing style? James' snobbishness and pomposity? James' gang of critics? Mr Rogal

does not deign to tell us anything more, except that he reminds us that "serious James scholars have never looked seriously upon Maugham, his work, or his critical remarks upon the subject." Well, I really don't how serious Maugham admires may possibly look any more seriously upon the works of Henry James. As it might be expected, the issue of homosexuality looms large every time anything is written about Maugham. I still cannot comprehend what all the fuss is about. Apart from some far-fetched speculations and confused ramblings, as in the "El Greco" case above, Maugham's homosexuality is perfectly insignificant detail, especially as regards his works which after all are, or least should be, the most important matter of discussion when Maugham is concerned. In his encyclopedia Mr Rogal has an entry titled "Homosexuality" which he starts thus: "No matter how one wishes to consider the subject - to declare Maugham an outright homosexual or to point to his homosexual "tendencies" - the issue cannot be ignored, either from a biographical or from an artistic perspective. Those scholars who approach Maugham's life reasonably and objectively (Calder and Morgan come most obviously to mind) identify the particulars without moral conclusion or significance." Calder and Morgan objective and reasonable? This must be one of the most stupendous jokes in the universe. Calder and Morgan who have written the most grossly prejudiced biographies of Maugham. In both cases, incidentally, the treatment of homosexuality is the most outrageous one; just the direction is different: Morgan is obsessed with nasty details about Maugham's personal life whereas Calder has absolutely no competition when it comes to the most ridiculous crap about homosexual hints in Maugham works. Leaving aside my scepticism that such thing as objectivity exists at all and such thing as reason is more common than prejudiced passion, Morgan and Calder are the last men who can be called either objective or reasonable, with regard to Maugham at all events. It is true that neither of them raises his finger in moral indignation, which is commendable, but it doesn't really make their writings any less crass or preposterous, respectively. What case has Mr Rogal to make? A very poor one. The artistic implications, elusive as they are, I have pondered a great deal and I remain convinced that, if Maugham had ever though his writing compromised by his personality, homosexuality would surely have been at one of the last places, if there at all. I am not sure what "outright homosexual" is supposed to mean, but if it is something like "strictly homosexual", that Maugham certainly was, at least in the second half of his life. What this has to do with his works I haven't the least idea. Mr Rogal mentions perfunctory Maugham's two explicit passages on the subject in his non-fiction writings - about El Greco in "Don Fernando" and about Herman Melville in "Ten Novels and Their Authors" - in both cases with one "see earlier"; as we've already seen there is nothing worth seeing earlier. He then goes to Maugham's own works where the great writer "circumvents the issue and leaves much to the imagination of the reader." I should have thought this an excellent place to finish the discussion since, obviously, there are many other themes of much greater importance in Maugham's works and speculation is a dangerous business anyway. But Mr Rogal goes on for another half page (only, thankfully) to write the usual junk almost every writer about Maugham has written: the sensuous description of "Red" in the eponymous story, the androgynous Mildred and her abnormal relationship with Philip Carey, the first person narrator in "The Razor's Edge" feeling the biceps of a sailor. Baffling inanity. I don't really know what to say to something like this. One hardly needs to add that there are numerous infinitely more significant issues in "Red" or Maugham's last major novel, not to mention that the nature of the main relationship in "Of Human Bondage", abnormal as it is, has barely anything whatsoever to do with any sexuality at all. It is much more psychological and deeper than that. But Mr Rogal goes even further. He has some original contributions to make. The most stupefyingly idiotic of these in his remark that Bertha Craddock is believed to be Maugham's early alter ego ("Mrs Craddock" was first published in 1902 and written few years before) and her admiration for her husband's intensely masculine hands, nay her kissing and squeezing them, are apparently unmistakable homosexual suggestions. I don't know about life, but sometimes non-fiction is definitely stranger than fiction. Mr Rogal's puerile reflections are completely invalidated by the simple fact that Bertha Craddock is far from Maugham's alter ego; Miss Ley who appears in the same novel as well as much more prominently in "The Merry-Go-Round" (1904) may well be accepted as a character that has a lot of common ground with Maugham's personality at the time, but certainly not Mrs Craddock. Finally, Mr Rogal crowns his already fabulous record with the extraordinarily perceptive observation that Gilbert Napier, the young man who married the old and dowdy Jane in the eponymous short story, is indeed a homosexual with a mother fixation; to identify him as such "sufficient evidence from his description and actions can be amassed." I rest my case. The coupling of such outstandingly absurd opinions with truly unbelievable sloppiness, not to mention perfunctory treatment of publishing history, revisions, prefaces, etc., all of them issues of great importance for writer as productive and consistent as Maugham, makes me wonder what prompt me to give Mr Rogal's encyclopedia three full stars a year or so ago. Certainly, the book has some value for Maugham admirers, but it's very slight indeed, consisting of mere trivia absolutely insufficient to account neither for the scarcity of the volume nor for its exorbitant price. I feel like crying when I reflect that people like Mr Rogal are considered "Maugham scholars".

William Somerset Maugham was one of the most popular and successful British writers of his time. From October 1897, when he completed his medical education at St. Thomas's Hospital in London, until his death in December 1965, Maugham wrote twenty novels, filled nine volumes with his short stories, wrote thirty-one plays, and published seven

volumes of prose nonfiction. His writings reflect the tensions of the Boer War, World War I, and World War II; the lavishness of the highest levels of British and American society during the first six decades of the 20th century; the glamor of Hollywood, Paris, New York, San Francisco, and London; and the romance of China, Malaya, Borneo, and India. His popularity brought him prosperity. At a 1962 auction, 35 of his paintings sold for nearly \$1.5 million; bequests in his will totaled \$280,000; his royalties during the last ten years of his life averaged \$50,000 per year; and his Riviera estate, purchased in 1927 for \$48,000, sold for \$730,000 in 1967. This reference book is a guide to Maugham's fascinating life and career. The volume begins with a brief discussion of the importance of Maugham's life and work, followed by a detailed chronology of important biographical and literary events. Through several hundred alphabetically arranged entries, the encyclopedia overviews Maugham's drama, fiction, and prose nonfiction; his family; the persons whom he knew and with whom he associated; the places where he lived and to which he journeyed, particularly the cities and villages that he inserted into his works; and the historical, cultural, social, and political issues that governed his life and career. Each entry closes with a brief bibliography, and the volume includes a selected bibliography of critical studies.

"Rogal has produced a useful, accessible guide to Maugham's life, career, and works... Articles include biographical entries on Maugham and his family, friends, and associates, plus some of those who influenced his art. Articles on each of Maugham's works, including those very obscure, are tightly written and informative. In addition, Rogal includes helpful accounts of movies and plays based on Maugham's fiction...valuable guidance for Maugham readers and scholars."-Choice?Rogal has produced a useful, accessible guide to Maugham's life, career, and works... Articles include biographical entries on Maugham and his family, friends, and associates, plus some of those who influenced his art. Articles on each of Maugham's works, including those very obscure, are tightly written and informative. In addition, Rogal includes helpful accounts of movies and plays based on Maugham's fiction...valuable guidance for Maugham readers and scholars.?-ChoiceAbout the AuthorSAMUEL J. ROGAL is Chair of the Division of Humanities and Fine Arts at Illinois Valley Community College. He has written some 150 articles, and his more than 25 books include *A Companion to the Characters in the Fiction of W. Somerset Maugham* (1996), *Sing Glory and Hallelujah! Historical and Biographical Guide to Gospel Hymns Nos. 1 to 6 Complete* (1996), *Agriculture in Britain and America, 1660-1820: An Annotated Bibliography of the Eighteenth Century Literature* (1994), *Medicine in Great Britain from the Restoration to the Nineteenth Century, 1660-1800* (1992), *A Chronological Outline of American Literature* (1987), *A Guide to the Hymns and Tunes of American Methodism, 1878-1964* (1986), *The Children's Jubilee: A Bibliographical Survey of Hymnals for Infants, Youths and Sunday Schools Published in Britain and America, 1655-1900* (1983), and *A Chronological Outline of British Literature* (1980), all published by Greenwood.