

## 1: William Gerhardie | The Modern Novel

*William Alexander Gerhardie OBE FRSL (21 November - 15 July ) was an Anglo-Russian novelist and playwright. His first novel, Futility ( ), drew on his experiences of fighting the Bolsheviks in pre-revolutionary Russia.*

Share via Email Philip Ardagh on the Septimus Treloar series by Stephen Chance One of my favourite presents as a child was a book token, which gave me the opportunity to agonise for ages over the bookshop shelves. This was how I came upon one of my favourite childhood literary heroes: A retired copper of 30 years turned vicar of a sleepy parish in the Fens, Septimus was an adult protagonist and a refreshing change to those groups of children stumbling by chance upon villainous gangs. I first encountered Septimus in *Septimus and the Danedyke Mystery* , which was to become, without a doubt, the very best of a good series. Septimus even manages to get one of their fingerprints off a glossy postcard of his beloved church. The book was made into a fairly faithful TV adaptation, which somehow completely lacked the spark of the original. Stephen Chance was the pseudonym of Philip W Turner, winner of the Carnegie prize, so be in no doubt of the quality of his writing. The independent scholar, unaffected by the fashions and orthodoxies of academe, is essential for the healthy functioning of intellectual discussion. Historically, you needed a private income; nowadays, a separate job that leaves you enough energy to write. Equally important is a sturdy independence of mind. Alethea Hayter never held an academic post: Her most popular was *A Sultry Month* , a brilliant recreation of a few weeks in London literary life in , which is highly original in its form and narrative cross-cutting. It deserves to be in permanent old-fashioned print, but its resuscitation in print on demand, along with some of her other books, is a matter for celebration. Two books by women interested and excited me. One was the autobiography of Evelyn Sharp, who was a suffragist, wrote for the *Yellow Book* and believed in leading an independent life. The book is called *Unfinished Adventure*: She was imprisoned, and had her belongings removed by bailiffs during the first world war when she continued to assert the principle of "no taxation without representation". She was perspicacious, witty and a very good writer. Murray was a doctor, not a writer, but the detail of the world she shows us is revealing and moving. Eager not to miss the action, he took a truck and, against orders, drove to rejoin his regiment. He served as a tank commander throughout the whole of the allied advance across North Africa, and *Alamein to Zem Zem* is his story. Boyishness and inexperience give it flash-bulb immediacy. The low-slung tanks race across the desert like speedboats, trailing dust clouds. Everyone wears a white dust-mask, like a clown. The shattering engine noise inside the tank makes the world outside into a silent film. Scenes of unforgettable pity and terror unfold. The dead litter the desert, grotesque or fearsomely comic. A company of Italian Bersaglieri lie "like trippers taken ill", their plumed helmets fluttering, their corpses surrounded by picture postcards of Milan, Venice, family snapshots and other "pitiable rubbish". There is no hatred for the enemy. Both sides treat prisoners well. Chatting with some, Douglas finds that one was at Cologne university before the war and competed in athletics against Cambridge. Another was an opera singer in Milan. This is the only book from the second world war comparable with the first-war narratives of Sassoon, Blunden or Graves. It should never be out of print. Both are in a tradition of English absurdism rather than satire: *A Piece of the Sky is Missing* is like a sort of dry run for that novel: When I at last managed to find an affordable paperback copy online, it got lost in the post. Afterwards, I found that the seller lived only half a mile away from my house. Nobbs would have appreciated the irony. It is a question every poet needs to ask continually and Ewart was too good ever to forget it. His ability to write simply, directly and truthfully was combined with a high degree of technical skill and a delight in experimenting with form. His unfailing ability to spot the bogus or inflationary in others provided material for many of his humorous poems. He laughed at the posturing of poets, at the critics and at idiocy, especially solemn idiocy, wherever he found it. Although he is often thought of as a writer of light verse, he wrote many serious poems on serious subjects, including some that drew on his memories of active service in the second world war, several that expressed his leftwing views on social and political issues, and many wise and poignant poems about love and death. It has been unavailable for some years and I will be very happy to see it back in print. His subject matter broke new ground, and his stories combine a Dickensian richness of character and incident

with some startling modernist twists. *Hemlock and After* was one of the first gay novels to hit the postwar world, at a time when homosexuality was still illegal, and *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* analyses a wide range of British society in a complicated plot that offers all the pleasures of detective fiction combined with a steady and humane insight. Each time I reread it, I find a new nuance, another accurate guess about the world we were about to inhabit. Wilson taught his readers more about sexual politics than most of his contemporaries, and he wrote superbly about women. He was deeply influenced by the tradition of the classic English novel - by Jane Austen, George Eliot and Henry James - and his heroines make their way through the treacherous social maze with courage and aplomb. He was writing at a time when ideas about gender were undergoing profound and lasting changes, and helped to contribute to those changes. *No Laughing Matter*, which many consider his masterpiece, is a huge 20th-century panorama, a family saga cast in an entirely new mode. It is a piece of history, which brought us up to date with the revolutions of the 60s. It is also, like all his work, at times very funny. He was as witty as Evelyn Waugh, and a good deal wiser than most of the Kingsley Amis generation. He spends it in an unnamed but famously picturesque north European city, perhaps Riga or Tallinn, perhaps entirely fictitious. It is also framed in time. We are in the summer of , and the life of this little theatre is given a peculiar piquancy by our knowledge though, so far as I recall, Dennis never refers to it that when the season ends it will vanish, and be overtaken by the long, bleak years of war and its aftermath, when no tables will be set out in the sun and the world that young men discover on their travels will be a very different one. They are not of the centre, of the consensus. But they are not a marginalised people: And the most important intuition is of mystery. The Red Priest will thunder again. The big chapel will be desecrated. The Master will be felled. And the mystery life of its people, agitated and baffled by an unease just that bit beyond their comprehension and control, will unfold again as if for the first time. And the novel will be acclaimed and garlanded again. But what will keep it permanently vital will be the response it evokes once more from its astonished and grateful readers.

Susan Hill on *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot* by Angus Wilson In the midth century, Angus Wilson was widely known and highly regarded as a novelist, a shrewd observer and sharp commentator on human affairs with a particular eye for pretension and snobbery. For a homosexual male writer, he was an acute portrayer of women, and in arguably his finest novel, *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot*, he plumbed the depths of the female heart. It is one of the best modern novels about widowhood. How and why his novels and glittering short stories have been out of print for so many years is not really a mystery - he and the period about which he wrote best, the s, went out of fashion, as did his sort of realism, his brand of perception, his kind of wisdom. It is we and our literary taste that moved on. It is high time we moved back again and discovered what a fine writer he was. Wilson was great company - amusing, camp, even waspish on the surface but, just like his books, with great empathy, sensitivity and kindness, which were clear when one was talking privately to him and he saw no need to perform. Anyone encountering the novels encounters the man. Both were, and are, a rare treat and a great privilege.

Michael Holroyd on *Futility, The Polyglots and Doom* by William Gerhardie William Gerhardie was a writer of great talent and originality whose books need to be rediscovered by each new generation of readers. This, his first novel, was taken up in England by Katherine Mansfield who found a publisher for Gerhardie and also by Edith Wharton, who wrote an enthusiastic preface to the American edition. The book was a huge critical success in both countries and Gerhardie was hailed as "the English Chekhov". Many readers, however, were to consider his masterpiece to be his second novel, *The Polyglots*, which contains a multitude of tragicomic characters who are encountered by a young man while travelling on a military mission in the Far East. Perhaps his oddest, most extraordinary novel was *Doom* Part satire, part social comedy, part science fiction, and containing an unforgettable portrait of the newspaper magnate Lord Beaverbrook under the name Lord Ottercove, it is a novel of the 20s that foreshadows the atomic age. His work has always needed individual enthusiasts to introduce it to new readers. From HG Wells in the s to William Boyd in the present century, they have taken up the torch and run a lap of honour with it, ensuring that his books have an enduring place in English fiction. Eventually, I summoned up the nerve to tackle it - and I was hooked. One of them would occasionally reappear in print - but it would vanish again with indecent speed. Still, I managed eventually to find all the major novels, and have now read almost all of them. Some are greater than others, but *Testament*, *Recollection of a Journey* and *A Child*

Possessed are all, I believe, masterpieces. Recollection of a Journey is a searing read, at times almost unbearable; but it is irresistibly powerful. It is so sad that an author like Hutchinson has been allowed to languish in obscurity for so long. True, there is nothing "cool" or fashionable about his writing; but there is a compassion, a profound level of understanding that will ensure that his books remain relevant - and important. PD James on Angus Wilson Angus Wilson, novelist and short story writer, is regarded as one of the most important and influential of modern writers, and the reappearance of these four books is long overdue. No Laughing Matter is a complex novel that is an interesting departure from the realism of his earlier work. The reissue of all four will be greeted with enthusiasm by those of us who were influenced by a writer of unique talent who combines consistently enthralling and entertaining storytelling with a highly original voice and fine literary craftsmanship. Boult also conducted Mahler and Bruckner long before they were fashionable. After the war, he was increasingly out of joint with a changing BBC, never enjoyed the Proms because of their limited rehearsal time, and was ruthlessly replaced in when he reached BBC retiring age. When I wrote the history of the BBC Symphony Orchestra in , the first person I turned to was Boult, and he was on the phone at 9am the next morning. He is all too teachable, and this means that his poems are often read through a thick filter of explication and paraphrase. Life, Mind and Art is a great aid to doing that.

**2: The Polyglots Â» Melville House Books**

*William Alexander Gerhardie (21 November - 15 July )*[1] was a British (Anglo-Russian) novelist and playwright. *William Gerhardie* by Norman Ivor Lancashire ().

When it comes to the twentieth century English comic novel, William Gerhardie is the main man. The aforementioned Waugh said of him I have talent, but he has genius. Yet, despite the fact that many critics have supported his claims, that his publishers have republished his works on several occasions and that many writers have recognised him as an influence, his works go in and out of print, the only biography of him sold badly and is also out of print and he is not generally recognised as one of the English lit greats. Standard literary histories give him short shrift. So what is the problem with William Gerhardie? Part of the problem was Gerhardie himself. He was very much an elegant man about town, talked about, having numerous love affairs and was friend to the famous. Lord Beaverbrook was his patron and appears in several of the novels as the thinly disguised Lord Ottercove. He knew most of the major British writers of his day. Though the writers valued him as a writer, for many others he was mere gossip column fodder. Another part of the problem is that his books do seem, if not inane, at least light-hearted and frivolous – at least on casual reading. They are often plotless – the critic Gorley Putt said of his work You can just as easily read a Gerhardie novel backwards as forwards. Gerhardie himself said Critics feel uneasy when a writer is not solemn. Who is he laughing at? And he has written some odd things. Meet Yourself As You Really Are, written with Prince Leopold Loewenstein, is a sort of pop psychology book with a sort of mirror on the spine so that you can meet yourself as you really are. The Memoirs of Satan is just that. Fun but – However, his best work is something else. The Polyglots is the best comic novel in English, bar none, and most of his other comic novels are well worth reading. Finally, Gerhardie is an English writer but is often said to be a Russian writer – the English Chekhov – so that his novels somehow seem irrelevant to the great realist mainstream of English literature. William Gerhardie he was actually born Gerhardi but added the e later was born in St. Petersburg in , the fifth of a family of six. His father owned a factory there. Gerhardie was brought up like his almost contemporary, Vladimir Nabokov , speaking four languages – English, French, German and Russian, of which English was probably the least used. Gerhardie and his siblings were brought up in the elitist atmosphere of the rich. When he was eighteen, he was sent to England for commercial training. He took up writing, determined to write in both English and Russian. When war broke out, he joined up and was eventually recruited to learn Bulgarian. But he was eventually transferred to the British Embassy in what was then Petrograd, for the Russian Revolution had broken out. The British Embassy was evacuated and the Gerhardie family left Russia. They travelled across the USA and set up a mission in Vladivostok but by early it was apparent that they were doing no good and returned to England. With his savings, Gerhardie decided to get an education and applied to and was accepted at Oxford University, where he studied English literature. While at Oxford, he wrote and had published his first novel – Futility – which had considerable critical success. This was followed almost immediately by his work on Chekhov, the first book on Chekhov not written in Russian. At this time he was concerned about finding somewhere for his parents to live and, on the suggestion from friends, moved them to Austria, where he himself stayed some time and wrote, among other things, The Polyglots. While successful, it did not have the same success as its predecessor. Gerhardie continued to produce a series of interesting books – novels, short stories, plays, biography – but none seemed to have the brilliance of his first two. Despite a succession of love affairs, he never married though he seriously contemplated marriage to Josephine Kaufman, widow of the Ever-Ready Razor King. One of his reasons for marrying her were his perpetual financial problems, which were not helped by his extensive and generally impecunious family. He continued to write and publish – he considered Of Mortal Love his best work. He hoped to break into film but was unable to do so but did manage to make a meagre living from journalism. The last work he published during his lifetime was his historical work The Romanovs, published nearly forty years before his death. It was not a success but is well worth reading. During the war, he worked for the BBC but also started work on what was to be a series of novels called Present Breath. At this time he was to become a recluse, limiting his contacts to

the telephone. The death of his mother was just one of the many reasons he shunned society. He lived in his solitude till â€” Most people imagine I have died long ago, he said. Books about William Gerhardie Davies, Dido:

### 3: William Gerhardie - Wikipedia

*William Gerhardie. William Alexander Gerhardie was born in St Petersburg, Russia, in As a young man he went to London and, when the First World War broke out, joined the army. He was first sent to Russia and later travelled the world before beginning to write.*

Like his first novel, *Futility*, it draws largely on personal experiences. To improve his English style he was studying Wilde; and an elegant cane, long locks and a languid expression were parts of his literary make-up at this time. The Russian Revolution sent Gerhardie back to England. But in he set out again, and after crossing America and Japan reached Vladivostok, where the British Military Mission had established itself. After two Years in Siberia, mostly in the company of generals, he left the army with an OBE and two foreign decorations, sailing home by Way of Singapore, Colombo and Port Said a journey that forms the closing chapters of *The Polyglots*. *The Polyglots* is the narrative of a high-spirited egocentric young officer who comes across a Belgian family, rich in eccentricities, to whom he is related and with Whom he lives while on a military mission to the Far East. It is trained folly. He completed it under difficult conditions While his father was dying. But when she came to the sea-burial of Natasha, she began to cry, and this bothered him. Willy has invented it. None of his novels display with more skill and vitality the peculiar inclusiveness of his philosophy, and no happier narrator ever adopted the first person singular, Captain Georges Hamlet Alexander Diabologh is a young man with literary aspirations. Our attitude to life, Gerhardie implies, is the same as our attitude to fiction which is born of our experience of life. It is in the orchestration of contradictory moods and attitudes that *The Polyglots* excels: In *Futility* and *The Polyglots* he brought something new to fiction. The characters, or at least the social personalities they have developed, are suggested very simply with recurring patterns of words: They are handled in a manner for which it is difficult to find a parallel. They are observed with passion yet without sentimentality, accurately yet with the dimension of pathos in that they are surrounded by a ludicrous world into which they must grow up. Her burial at sea is an anguish of the heart. It was a cloudless morning of extreme heat and stuffiness and damp, and the decks were crowded, noisy and indifferent, and I thought that suffering and death should be in the wind and cold of winter, in the slough and drowsiness of autumn, but not in summer -- oh, not in summer The sea went out in large ripples. The gulls flew screaming and wheeling above them The ship had been brought to as *The Spectator* 28 May near standstill as possible; barely perceptibly she slid along on the deep, deep, flapping sea. The plank was on ropes, like a swing: Below loomed the Indian Ocean, stretching out its white paws of froth like a big cat The mother was held up by her husband and Berthe. She looked pale, pasty, she looked awful. Swiftly the flag was pulled off. They then swung it once our way, once to the sea. Natasha slid off, and describing a curve in the air splashed into the water. A few seconds and she disappeared beneath the foam As Anthony Powell has pointed out, there is a parallel here between *The Polyglots* and *e*. This was a trick in the English character that Gerliar, of die really never understood. As the narrator in this novel: Snow to Olivia Manning:

### 4: Futility by William Gerhardie | Quarterly Conversation

*William Alexander Gerhardie OBE FRSL (21 November - 15 July ) was a British (Anglo-Russian) novelist and playwright.*

Futility is the only novel in paperback, another omission that Penguin ought to rectify. Gerhardie died in his 82nd year – 55 years after the publication of Futility and nearly forty years after his last novel. As the editors point out, he early acquired a reputation for failure, and there was little in the second half of his life to suggest that this judgment was seriously wrong. He was a shadowy survivor, living round the corner from Broadcasting House but known to few. Of course there were said to be works in progress: Gerhardie belonged to the Twenties and Thirties. If one book does well, the second is disparaged; or, if it is not, the first is forgotten. He compares novel-reviews to strings of sausages, churned out by writers impatient to get on with their own work. In some ways he resembles Ford Madox Ford, though Ford was much more prolific, indeed embarrassingly so. Both were dedicated to the art of fiction; and Ford also died a failure and three parts forgotten. Neither books nor theses so far as I know are written about him. In an age when large numbers of people are maintained by the public to read English literature, and to train even larger numbers of readers to be a proper audience for good writing, Gerhardie finds no place in syllabuses which find room for, say, Vonnegut or Doris Lessing. Since Henry Green, arguably the best English novelist of his time, is little better off, we need not waste our time being surprised at this neglect. It would be agreeable to believe that the present stir of interest might alter the situation: It may even reinforce the old view that Gerhardie was no more than a quite interesting and rather peculiar kind of failure. In fact, everybody interested in good novels should read him. I speak as a new convert, for although I read Futility forty years ago I knew nothing else until this posthumous book induced me to look out some of the other novels. I bought *The Polyglots* and *Of Mortal Love* for four dollars in a New York second-hand bookshop, and was quickly persuaded that Gerhardie is a novelist of high order. To explain how such a writer may come to be overlooked would call for a whole book about the way we live now as a literary community. At one level we behave like Time in *Troilus and Cressida* – that is, like a fashionable host that slightly shakes his parting guest by the hand, And with his arms outstretched as he would fly, Grasps in the comer. The welcome ever smiles, And farewell goes out sighing. The full text of this book review is only available to subscribers of the London Review of Books. You are not logged in If you have already registered please login here If you are using the site for the first time please register here If you would like access to the entire online archive subscribe here Institutions or university library users please login here.

**5: The Polyglots : William Gerhardie :**

*The British-Russian writer William Gerhardie, a glittering literary presence in pre-war England, is not exactly forgotten. But he has the biography and checkered publishing history of someone who gets "rediscovered" once a decade or so.*

They lack the basic skills required to hold the attention of readers; they are too pedestrian ever to say anything of value; they lack originality, verve and everything else which can make the written word transcend the ordinary. In rare instances, however, obscurity is simply undeserved, but it has still come to pass. In one particular case, that of William Gerhardie, this fate is "at least initially" somewhat surprising. He had a fortuitous start: Michael Holroyd highlights the following endorsement: I think this is what has occurred in this instance, and it seems all of this helps Gerhardie, who was born in , died in and never produced another novel after I will do my best to avoid over-praising his writing on the basis of its seeming novelty alone; and I hope that the rightful praise Gerhardie deserves is understood to be genuine. Its characters are composites, built from real situations and real people, and derived from hard-acquired experience; they are not stereotypes or mere comic props. They matter because their inspiration mattered; and thus the whole thing means something "and not just to the writer, whose youthful activities provided the raw material for this work. One is simply caught up in this story of abjectness and failure amid political tumult. It is entrancing, as enticing as the three beautiful and somehow sad sisters to whom the protagonist finds himself bound. They are chronically short of money, and yet the family is still surrounded by grasping dependants: As the promise of money "invoked perversely, as for adventurers and explorers the world over, in the oasis-like promise of gold mines far away "becomes more and more remote, there is great bathos and pathos to be found in the terrible lack of action. It is paralysing, and nothing seems to change "at least for the better. The family leaves their elegant quarters in St Petersburg to travel to Vladivostok, largely for reasons connected to the illusory security promised by those gold mines. All the while they wait. They sit and lie around rooms and wait, talking occasionally and languidly or ferociously and with fierce passion. This notion of waiting, wasting life away, is a powerful one; and the novel is both acute and also affecting, grand and petty, noble and squalid, at times funny and quite bitterly ironic. The description of this pain and this condition is tremendous. It is really rather fine. It is a work of maturity and the nature both of its themes and its characterisation serve to separate Futility from other examples of fiction from that time. Waugh in many ways is simply nasty; his characters are laughed at, not with, and they are made to suffer quite terrible things "in Vile Bodies, after all, everyone is the victim of savage mockery from the author and all "more or less "end up unhappy and, in some cases, dead by the end of proceedings. There is a certain cruelty to all of this; it eclipses narrative playfulness and simple acuity. It is not brusque; it is not bitter and disdainful; and it simply cannot be considered cruel. Added to this is the matter of dialogue. Witness the conversations in Vile Bodies which take place over the telephone: Adam Fenwick-Symes, the protagonist, and Nina Blount talk about their perpetually fluctuating engagement in formulaic and almost unfeeling terms. It is all rather amusing, but it is never wholly believable "never quite real. Though it must be said that he can provide humorous vignettes if the mood takes him, the following being a description of post-war Russian squalor: He witnesses this as a soldier, a British warrior whose job is to train the Russians to fight Bolshevism themselves. Needless to say this position exposes him to all the brutality and absurdity of war, and of that war in particular. The morning unveiled a gruesome picture. The snow that had fallen in the night, and was still falling, now covered the ground and its dead bodies some inches deep. The square, the streets, the yards, the rails, and sundry ditches betrayed them lying in horrid postures, dead or dying. Then they lay still and stiff in horrible attitudes. Men and women would stoop over them, gaze and wonder. Perhaps there is nothing that brings home so clearly the conviction of the temporary nature of human things than the sight of a dead body. What a moment since had been a human being with a life and purpose of its own was now an object, like a stone or a stick. Another theme is that of love, and here the two writers take dramatically divergent stances: It is the classic way of treating life. For my ineffectual return to Vladivostok is the effectual conclusion of my theme. There were six open churns behind Miss Runcible, four containing petrol and two water. She threw her cigarette over her shoulder, and by

a beneficent attention of Providence which was quite rare in her career it fell into the water. Had it fallen into the petrol it probably would have been all up with Miss Runcible. General Bologoevski, a caricatured Russian White, admires Nina from afar: All of this gives the narrative a real sense of immediacy and vitality; and when Nina and her sisters sail away, and when the promise of happiness and pleasure they initially embody leaves with them, the reader is left as desolate and as despondent as Andrei Andreiech and possibly Gerhardie himself. The space at the quay where the Simbirsk had been showed empty; dull, dirty water heaved at my feet and a cork from a bottle and some bits of wood heaved upon it. I looked out upon the sea for a sign of the steamer. It had completely vanished. I peered at the horizon to see if I could spot the smoke from its two funnels. But there was none. The book in many ways is summed up by this, its final paragraph. It is poetic and mundane, concerned with the highest impulses of mankind and also our most basic desires, and throughout the novel has a kind of ethereal lightness of touch which serves to give genuinely interesting ideas an effective exposition. He then remonstrates with his host:

### 6: Richard T Kelly: The Polyglots by William Gerhardie; and my part in its persistence

*William Gerhardie (he was actually born Gerhardi but added the e later) was born in St. Petersburg in , the fifth of a family of six. His father owned a factory there. Gerhardie was brought up like his almost contemporary, Vladimir Nabokov, speaking four languages - English, French, German and Russian, of which English was probably the least used.*

During that period he witnessed the development of the Revolution which ruined his father who escaped Russia to exile in England having been allowed out through being identified with the already dead British socialist Keir Hardie. Wells also championed his work. His first novel, *Futility*, was written while he was at Worcester College, Oxford and drew on his experiences in Russia fighting or attempting to fight the Bolsheviks, along with his childhood experiences visiting pre-revolutionary Russia. Some say that it was the first work in English to explore fully the theme of "waiting", later made famous by Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*, but it is probably more apt to recognize a common comic nihilism between those two figures. His next novel, *The Polyglots*, is probably his masterpiece although some argue for *Doom*. Again it deals with Russia Gerhardie was strongly influenced by the tragi-comic style of Russian writers such as Chekhov, about whom he wrote a study while in college. He collaborated with Hugh Kingsmill on the biography *The Casanova Fable*, his friendship with Kingsmill being both a source of conflict over women and a great intellectual stimulus. Although he continued to write, he published no new work after . After a period of poverty-stricken oblivion, he lived to see two "definitive collected works" published by Macdonald in 1949, revised in 1974 with prefaces by Michael Holroyd who consistently championed his work. He was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in . More recently, both Prion and New Directions Press have been reissuing his works. Gerhardie lived the last 37 years of his life in the West End of London in increasing seclusion. He died at the Middlesex Hospital in June aged . After cremation his ashes were scattered in Regents Park in a gathering including writers Olivia Manning and J. This is the way I and my relatives pronounce it, though I am told it is incorrect. Philologists are of the opinion that it should be pronounced with the g as in Gertrude. I believe they are right. I, however, cling to the family habit of mispronouncing it. But I do so without obstinacy. If the world made it worth my while I would side with the multitude.

**7: William Gerhardtie Â» 28 May Â» The Spectator Archive**

*WILLIAM GERHARDIE ( - ) was one of the 20th century's most underappreciated masters. Of Anglo-Russian upbringing, he deftly combined the keen observations of Russian social realism with the sly wit of the English romantic comedy, all while honing his own particular comic edge on the dawning absurdity of the new century.*

Share via Email The first truly modern writer of fiction: He was 44 years old. His lungs were ravaged by tuberculosis. In Russia, Chekhov is revered as a short-story writer of genius; his plays are considered as extremely interesting but somehow ancillary and complementary to his main achievement. And this Russian conception of his work has some validity: Chekhov, whatever his standing as a playwright, is quite probably the best short-story writer ever. Like certain great pieces of music, his stories repay constant revisitings. The two dozen or so mature stories he wrote in the last decade of the 19th century have not dated: Chekhov, it can be argued, was the first truly modern writer of fiction: Chekhov visited Biarritz in south-west France in His health was failing and he had to seek a warmer climate in the winter months. For an effectively monoglot Russian writer scant French and a little German and a semi-invalid, he had travelled fairly far and wide in his life. In he made an epic day trans-Russian journey to Sakhalin, a prison island in furthest Siberia. The book he wrote about the conditions of the prisoners there is earnest but dull; it does not live up to the near intolerable struggle it took to reach the place. He came home by steamer via the orient: The horse works, all its muscles drawn tight like the strings on a double bass and a fly settles on its flanks and tickles and buzzes And what does the fly buzz about? It scarcely knows itself; simply because it is restless and wants to proclaim: Only once [a critic] said something which made an impression on me - he said I would die in a ditch, drunk. Fatally ill, he had travelled to the German spa town of Badenweiler in the vain hope that German doctors might save him. German medical etiquette demanded that, when the patient was near death and there was nothing more that a doctor could do, a glass of champagne would be offered. Chekhov knew what this meant. His last words were: Gerhardtie, who is tremendously acute about Chekhov he published a passionately enthusiastic short book about him in spoke with real authority. An Englishman, born in Moscow in , wholly bilingual, Gerhardtie idolised Chekhov whom he read in Russian long before he was translated. Before Chekhov, the event-plot drove all fictions: Tolstoy, Flaubert, Dickens and Turgenev could not resist the event-plot powering and shaping their novels. Chekhov abandoned this type of self-conscious "story" for something more casual and realistic. His stories are anti-novelistic, in the traditional sense. They are like life as we all live it. He wrote about religious folk, indeed one of his greatest stories is entitled "The Bishop". But intelligent people who believed in God seemed baffling to him. Up until that date Chekhov had earned his living as a composer of humorous short stories, almost like variety sketches he was a qualified doctor but it was his writing that sustained him financially. The vast majority of them have not aged well: Then in he published a story, "Requiem" under his own name. Grigorovitch was hugely impressed, and wrote to Chekhov acclaiming his talent and urging him to abandon his comic squibs. I almost burst into tears, I was profoundly moved and I now feel it has left a deep trace in my soul. For Chekhov it was a Damascene moment. The 15 years remaining to him bear witness to his new zeal as a serious artist. Chekhov was born in in the Crimea, in a town called Taganrog, far to the south of Moscow on the Sea of Azov. More Levantine than Euro pean Turkey was miles away , Taganrog was a hot, fly-infested port with a varied population - Russians, Greeks, Armenians, Italians. Very early in his life Chekhov became the family breadwinner. He supported them all - doggedly and in the main ungrudgingly - until his death. In his short life Chekhov had many lovers but he had, as we would now term it, a real problem with commitment. Most of the women he had affairs with would have been happy to marry him but Chekhov was always careful to keep them at a distance, to break the relationship off if it seemed likely to become too heated. He wrote to a friend, "The Japanese girl And all the time she is laughing and making lots of tsu noises All this is done with coquetry, laughing, singing and saying tsu. In Chekhov undertook a koumiss cure, drinking four bottles of the milk daily. He gained 12lb in a fortnight. A month later he was still coughing blood. Chekhov married the actress Olga Knipper in when he had three years left to live. It was a union that dumbfounded and outraged most of his family - it seemed incomprehensible. It has

subsequently been presented as one of the great romances of the 20th century. My own theory is that his long affair with Lika Mizinova was the real love story. He met Lika in ; she was a teacher, an aspiring opera singer, blonde and buxom and 19 years old. Chekhov was 10 years older. For almost a decade they conducted a bantering, passionate on-off love affair. They had a child together. Betrayal enough to break up any relationship, one would have thought - but Chekhov kept seeing Lika. Her career failed, she grew plump but something kept drawing him back to her. She is often considered to be the model for Nina in *The Seagull*. In it you will find all the key Chekhovian tropes: This dark Chekhovian comic ruthlessness found its way into English literature via William Gerhardie. Katherine Mansfield plagiarised Chekhov but she responded to his more elegiac tone. This tone of voice has subsequently come to seem very English, but it was there in Chekhov first. My other favourite Chekhov stories in no particular order are: Chekhov went to Nice in to protect his damaged lungs from the ravages of the Russian winter. I spent most of a year there in Like Biarritz, Nice is a place where, here and there, the ghost of Chekhov haunts its streets. At the turn of the century it was popular with Russians and Chekhov stayed in a Russian pension in the rue Gounod. The room I rented was on the rue Dante, a few blocks away. Chekhov liked Nice the weather was good and tolerated the routine and circumscribed life he lived there. Nice was a good place to read, he said, but not to write. Olga Knipper was a leading actress at the Moscow Art Theatre. Chekhov married her in , three years before he died. Olga survived him by 55 years, dying in she also survived Hitler and Stalin. She was an ardent keeper of the flame but, despite her efforts to portray it otherwise, there is no disguising that the marriage was a strange one. They spent much more time apart than together hence their copious and affecting correspondence: Sometimes she even kept her Moscow address from her husband. She and Chekhov tried to conceive a child but failed. He beat his sons remorselessly. Chekhov saw it as the watershed in his life, the day he woke knowing that he would not be beaten by his father. Yet this sentimental, sadistic boor was financially supported loyally and tirelessly by his third son throughout his life, living with him in his various establishments and particularly at Melikhovo, the small estate Chekhov bought to the south of Moscow and which, of all the places he lived in from to , he most loved. Pavel effectively ran the estate with shrewd serf-like application. He died in , aged 73, on an operating table when the surgeon was attempting to rectify a gangrenous hernia. Pavel had forgotten to put on his truss and developed the fatal hernia by picking up a 20lb-bag of sugar. Chekhov declared it the end of an era, that "the main cog had jumped out of the Melikhovo machine". He never loved his father but he had never let him down. He abandoned Melikhovo shortly after his father died. Quinine was his favourite. The most natural and unposed photographs of Chekhov show him sitting on the steps of his verandah with Quinine tucked under his arm. Janet Malcolm, who has written a profound and insightful book on Chekhov *Reading Chekhov* , says that "We never see people in life as clearly as we see the people in novels, stories and plays; there is a veil between ourselves and even our closest intimates, blurring us to each other. Chekhov tells us a great deal about his characters but, however, resists full exposure: This is part of his genius: Suvorin had no illusions about Chekhov: Chekhov was an ardent Dreyfusard; Suvorin unashamedly anti-semitic. There was no rapprochement and Suvorin bitterly regretted the rift. Asked about his politics once, Chekhov declared that he wanted only to be a "free artist".

**8: QUOTES BY WILLIAM GERHARDIE | A-Z Quotes**

*About The Polyglots. The Anglo-Russian author William Gerhardie was hailed by writers including Graham Greene, Edith Wharton, Evelyn Waugh and others as a "genius," and this, his long-out-of-print second novel, is generally acclaimed as his comic masterpiece—“not to mention “the most influential English novel of the twentieth century,” according to William Boyd.*

So glad to see Melville House has pursued! I have attached the article. I said something about Vintage or even Pantheon and you said pursue it, remember. Two novels and a memoir by a thirty-five year old polyglot later, I am utterly convinced that these novels deserve to be in print in the USA. Of course deserve is a tricky word. He is a literary polyglot. Scott Fitzgerald who was writing at the exact same time as Gerhardie. This Side of Paradise was published two years before Futility. But Gerhardie also has the absurd, slapstick humor of Gogol at the same time as the highly sophisticated wit of Evelyn Waugh who, says Symons, was most assuredly influenced by Gerhardie. All three of these books are laugh out loud funny. Just as every political party considers itself a "centre-party" threatened by revolutionaries on the left and reactionaries on the right, so every young writer tends to think his talent is compounded from the choicest ingredients. One hopes--and on what little ground! Wells, without his splashing over; the analytical profundity of Proust, without his mawkish snobbism; the elemental sweep of D. Johnson, without his overbearingness; the dash of Byron without vanity; the faithful portraiture of Flaubert without his tortuous fastidiousness. The list could be prolonged. He pronounces upon, makes fun of, and is humbled by his literary forbears all in one breath. But then again, Gerhardie pronounces on everyone and everything. He makes an art of being offensive, slurring race, class, nationality, and the female sex as if such naive and egotistical proclamations were a necessary stage in the development of the artist. The first person narrator of both Futility and The Polyglots is the same as that of Memoirs of a Polyglot--a purported autobiography--which could lead one to deduce that all of these works are autobiographical. The material--characters and circumstances--may well be but the writing, the stuff, is pure artifice. Our narrator is one of the most elusive, untrustworthy, manipulative and repulsively endearing fictional characters I have ever come across. The author and his narrator persistently design to draw the reader into a fiction only to shove him violently out again by means of an aside or an observation or humor or satire and catapult him into a whole other "reality" which in turn is another fiction and so on. Reading these novels for I would say Memoirs of a Polyglot classifies as such as much as the others do is like being in a house of mirrors, your pleasure deriving from a constant, and rather discomfiting, blurring of the conventions of the real and the fantastic, of life and art. I, as a reader, am a great believer in plot and yet while reading these novels I never reflected on the virtual absence of plot until now. Things happen, characters cross continents, people die, there are wars, marriages, governments fall, fortunes are lost and yet all of this is too real to be considered part of a plot but nevertheless too artfully rendered to ever be considered a straight reflection of the real. All three of these early novels are set against a fascinating political and cultural backdrop--Russia and England during and immediately after World War I. And all three have for a protagonist a young man whose history and education match that of Gerhardie quite remarkably. In Memoirs of a Polyglot Gerhardie gives us the "real" story which Symons outlines in his review. It is an enormously playful book. And it is in this work that Gerhardie reveals most readily that the notion of ardent play is at the heart of his artistic vision. He is sent to St. Petersburg and while stationed there becomes involved with the Bursanov sisters and their rather bizarre family. Almost immediately we are led from what appears to be something akin to a drawing room comedy into what is actually a literary carnival. Of course, as the story unfolds we see that they really had none in the first place. It is merely a question of semantics: And so does the word family. Toward the end of the novel, when Andrei Andreiech arranges through the British foreign office for Nikolai Vasielevich and himself to go to Siberia to discover the fate of some mines he owns but has never earned a penny off of, the entire lot no one can bear to be left behind goes with them. I write and I think--" He stopped. We are moving, apparently doing something, going somewhere. One has a sense of accomplishing something. I lie here in my coupe and I think: At last I am doing something. I look out of the window, and my heart cries out: Where are we all going to?

And so, by contrast, as it were, I gain a sense of the importance of meditation. The Polyglots is again the portrait of a young polyglot, Georges Diabologh, who is an Englishman born on Japanese soil but who grew up in Russia before going to school in England. He is stationed in Japan during the war and makes forays into Russia. His love affair with his cousin Sylvia, whom he adores for her simple beauty and for being beautifully simple, is the centerpiece around which the rest of the novel is laid. The juxtapositions are often glorious. Gerhardt never lets himself, nor his reader, assume or trust anything: Humour is when I laugh at you and laugh at myself in the doing for laughing at you, and laugh at myself for laughing at myself, and thus to the tenth degree. The inestimable advantage of comedy over any other literary method of depicting life is that here you rise superior, unobtrusively, to every notion, attitude, and situation so depicted. We laugh--we laugh because we cannot be destroyed, because we do not recognize our destiny in any one achievement, because we are immortal, because there is not this or that world; but endless worlds: In this lies the hilarity, futility, the insurmountably greatness of all life. It is one of the classic novels of the twentieth century. I found myself laughing out loud often while reading these novels, but it was a laughter that more often than not reverberated in the soul. With each of them, I developed a bizarre relationship which I can only describe as pleasurablely disturbing. Olivia Manning, in an article in The Times wrote, "The humour of life, the poetry of death and the release of the spirit--these things William Gerhardt describes as no prose writer has done before him How did he become lost to view? How can we resurrect him? Anthony Powell, Evelyn Waugh, C. Snow, Kingsley Amis, William Cooper--all acknowledge his influence. He is one of the immortals. We all come out of him.

**9: The inspirational William Gerhardt | The Place for Lost Books**

July 16, , Page 24 *The New York Times Archives*. LONDON, July 15 (AP)â€”*The English novelist William Gerhardt, once de scribed as a genius by George Bernard Shaw and H. Cl. Wells, died today.*

It is also meaningless, or rather only meaningful when applied to works which have inspired a genuine cult-like devotion such as the novels of Ayn Rand for reasons unconnected with their literary merit putting it mildly. It is applied to novels such as *Catch 22* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* which are high in the list of all-time best sellers. It is applied to novels about drug dealers and serial killers. It is applied to any book which is turned into an artificially "edgy" Hollywood film. William Gerhardt is established so firmly as a "lost writer" that, in fact, it seems churlish to encourage his rediscovery by a wider readership, and I recoil at the prospect of labelling him a "cult" writer. Part of the pleasure in reading Gerhardt is the sense of ownership, and thus it would be somehow disturbing if Gerhardt became as well known as, for instance, Evelyn Waugh. Even the loyal if somewhat obsessive devotion shown by admirers of Anthony Powell would seem excessive if Gerhardt were its subject. Waugh said of Gerhardt: I have talent, but he has genius. We were proud of his early and immediate success, like men who have spotted the right horse. Those of an earlier generation were also admirers; Katherine Mansfield described his debut, *Futility*, as a: Edith Wharton provided a preface for *Futility*, saying: Perhaps part of the enjoyment of discovering Gerhardt is the Ozymandias effect; encountering a writer whose reputation once threatened to be vast and who ended up dying in obscurity and penury. To a certain temperament, *sic transit gloria mundi* is a beautiful lament. During the Revolution Gerhardt senior was thrown into a sack and taken to the dock to be drowned. A revolutionary asked who was inside the sack, and misheard the name as that of Keir Hardie, thus sparing Gerhardt to be ruined by the Revolution. After a Russian education, Gerhardt junior - marked out as "the dunce of the family" - was sent to England to begin a vague commercial career. Gerhardt preferred to affect a languid expression and a Wildean demeanour, dressing dandyishly while lounging around dreaming of theatrical triumphs. Later he would serve in the British Military Mission to Siberia, taking a part in the attempted intervention by the Western Powers. On his return he began study in Worcester College, Oxford. Oxford would feature in much of his work; as he wrote in *The Polyglots*: It is trained folly. He was very glad to have gone there, because otherwise he would have had an exaggerated respect for an Oxbridge man. His time at Oxford was not entirely wasted, for while there he wrote the first book in English about Chekhov and *Futility*. The novels feature a cavalcade of beautiful, teasing sisters, with interchangeable names like Nina and Zina. These ladies are, inevitably enough, accompanied by platoons of eccentric relatives. For this reason, reading two novels of Gerhardt in one consecutive sitting can be somewhat disorientating. One expects the characters of one to wander into another. *Futility* is, however, more accessible in this regard than other Gerhardt novels. The title of the first section, "The Three Sisters", is an obvious nod to Chekhov. The Anglo-Russian narrator, Andrei Andreiech, is adrift in the dizzyingly complex family life of Nikolai Vasilevich, his three young daughters, and his longtime live-in lover who he has now abandoned for a young woman, Zina, who brings her own retinue of eager dependants. Nikolai Vasilevich is seen by all as a man of considerable means, based on what turn out to be utterly worthless mines in Siberia. The eager dependants are exemplified by Uncle Kostia. Uncle Kostia is a writer, who has of course never published a word or given any indication of writing anything, but is nevertheless allowed to live as he wishes by the family out of respect for his apparent vocation: Eventually, when Revolution and Intervention make generosity even more expensive, Andrei Andreiech is prevailed upon to try and persuade Uncle Kostia to publish something: A kaleidoscope of the most subtle colours, if I may so express myself. And, Andrei Andreiech, it has taught me a great truth. It has taught me the futility of writing. Rather than the habit of some authors of attempting to create "character" by piling on detail, Gerhardt gives each character a recurrent phrase which manages to pinpoint them in the mind - the perpetually drunk Russian general who repeatedly mourns the "damrotten game" that is politics and greets any halfway attractive women with the words: There is Sir Hugo of the Admiralty whose response to most situations is an enthusiastic "Splendid! Intervention, for Andrei Andreiech, consists largely of an eternal train journey with Sir Hugo, an

increasingly splenetic Admiral who is ultimately reduced to unhappily complaining, when finally worn down by the obscurantism and incompetence of the various White Russian factions, and the whole menage of Nikolai Vasilevich: Some people think snow beautiful. I think it idiotic. The expectations of the Admiralty are confounded by Russian incomprehension of such concepts as organisation and efficiency. In the final sequence, Andrei throws in life in Oxford to travel back to Vladivostok and proclaim his love to Nina, the loveliest of the three sisters: Life, I thought, was worth all the novels in the world. And life was Nina. And Nina was life. And, by contrast, the people I encountered seemed pretentious and insincere. The women in particular were unreal. They talked of things that did not interest them with an affected geniality. They pretended a silly superiority or else an unconvincing inferiority. My three sisters were not like that. And I asked myself: What am I waiting for? In Vladivostok, however, it turns out that Nina is disappointed to see him. She never loved him, she says. Andrei is just in time to see the sisters depart for Shanghai, and brood miserably on the quayside. Now it is Oxford that seems to be a hub of pulsating life. It begins with a postmodern avant la lettre touch - the narrator, Dickin, reads an account of his involvement with two beautiful sisters to Lord Ottercove, the Beaverbrook-based press baron, and afterwards walks into a taxi with one of the sisters who has featured in the narrative. De Jones, it emerges, is more interested in apocalypse than in agricultural improvements. He repeatedly promises Dickin an evening newspaper to edit as a wedding present. It moves from romantic fantasy to evocation of what could be called High Media Mogulry to the bizarre apocalyptic coda set on a Swiss hillside. Lawrence that the world might end in the same way as a stocking ladders. Gerhardt also canvassed H. Wells for ideas on how to accomplish this bit-by-bit apocalypse, which stumped the father of science fiction. In real life, Beaverbrook had made contact with Gerhardt, with a peremptory summons to London from Vienna to hear the tycoon discourse on the excellence of *The Polyglots*. Beaverbrook would also toy with giving Gerhardt a newspaper to edit as a wedding present, although Gerhardt preferred to see himself as an artist rather than journalist. Thus, despite the praise of his peers and the might of Beaverbrook, Gerhardt continued on the path to his later obscurity. Loewenstein would sit around talking about psychological types, while Gerhardt rendered the whole into witty, elegant English. The reader would choose which option to take at the end of each paragraph, something in the manner of those *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks that were so popular in my childhood. A future of broken relationships, alcohol and relative penury loomed. Gerhardt would never achieve the glittering reputation his early praise seemed to merit. Futility is Gerhardt at his simplest and most effective, as well as a book which saddens with the vastness of the promise not wholly fulfilled. His other available works are looser and more obviously flawed, with moments of tremendous wit and brio. If only "cult" has not acquired its irritating implications, it would be the perfect description of his writing. Seamus Sweeney is a medical graduate and freelance writer.

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