

Sappho

Librettist Lawrence Durrell

1912 - 1990

Lawrence George Durrell was born on 27 February 1912 in Jullundur in northern India, near Tibet. His English father, Lawrence Samuel Durrell, and his Irish-English mother, Louisa Florence Dixie, had also been born in India. This mix of nationalities marked Durrell's creative imagination. He would claim in later years that he had 'a Tibetan mentality'.

Durrell's 'nursery-rhyme happiness' came to an end when he was shipped to England at age 11 to be formally educated. The immediate discomfort he felt in England he attributed to its lifestyle, which he termed 'the English death'. He explained that 'English life is really like an autopsy. It is so, so dreary'. Deeply alienated, he refused to adjust himself to England and resisted the regimentation of school life, failing to pass university exams.

Instead, he resolved to be a writer. At first he had difficulty finding his voice in words, both in verse and in fiction. After publishing his first novel, *Pied Piper of Lovers* (1935), he invented a pseudonym, Charles Norden and wrote his second novel, *Panic Spring* (1937), for the mass market.

Two fortunate events occurred in 1935 that changed the course of his career. First, he persuaded his mother, siblings, and wife, Nancy Myers, to move to Corfu, Greece, to live more economically and to escape the English winter.

Life in Greece was a revelation; Durrell felt it reconnected him to India. While in Greece, he wrote a plan for *The Book of the Dead*, which was an ancestor - though it bore little resemblance - to what may be his greatest literary accomplishment, *The Alexandria Quartet*.

Second, Durrell chanced upon Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) and wrote Miller a fan letter. Thus began a 45 year friendship and correspondence based on their love of literature, their fascination with the Far East, and their comradeship in the face of personal and artistic setbacks. In their early letters, Miller praised Durrell and urged him not to accede to Faber's suggestion that he expurgate portions of *The Black Book* (1938), the work on which Durrell was then focused. Durrell followed Miller's advice and stood firm.

After six years in Corfu and Athens, Durrell and his wife were forced to flee Greece in 1941, just ahead of the advancing Nazi army. They settled together in Cairo, along with their baby daughter Penelope Berengaria, who had been born in 1940.

In 1942, separated from his wife, Durrell moved to Alexandria, Egypt, and became press attaché in the British Information Office. Ostensibly working, Durrell was in reality closely observing the assortment of sights, sensations, and people that wartime Alexandria, a crossroads of the East and West, had to offer. He also met Eve Cohen, a Jewish woman from Alexandria, who was to become his model for Justine. Durrell married her in 1947, after his divorce from Nancy Myers. In 1951, their daughter Sappho Jane was born.

In 1945, 'liberated from [his] Egyptian prison', Durrell was 'free at last to return to Greece'. He spent two years in Rhodes as director of public relations for the Dodecanese Islands. He left Rhodes to become the

director of the British Council Institute in Cordoba, Argentina, from 1947-48. He then moved to Belgrade, Yugoslavia, where he was press attaché from 1949-52.

Durrell returned to the Mediterranean in 1952, hoping to find the serenity in which to write. He bought a stone house in Cyprus and earned a living teaching English literature. During that time period, peace proved elusive. War broke out among the Cypriot Greeks who desired union with Greece, the British (who were still attempting to control Cyprus as a crown colony) and the Turkish Cypriots (who favored partition). Durrell, by this time, had left teaching and was working as the British public relations officer in Nicosia. He found himself caught between the warring factions and even became a target for terrorists. *Bitter Lemons* (1957) is Durrell's account of these troubled years.

While in Cyprus, Durrell began writing *Justine*, the first volume of *The Alexandria Quartet*. He would eventually complete the four books in France. The *Quartet* was published between 1957 and 1960 and was a critical and commercial success. Durrell received recognition as an author of international stature.

After being forced out of Cyprus, Durrell finally settled in Sommières, in the south of France. In the next 35 years, he produced two more cycles of novels: *The Revolt of Aphrodite*, comprising *Tunc* (1968) and *Nunquam* (1970), and *The Avignon Quintet* (1974-1985). Neither of these cycles achieved the critical and popular success of *The Alexandria Quartet*. Durrell continued writing poetry, and his *Collected Poetry* appeared in 1980.

Durrell married two more times. He wed his third wife, Claude-Marie Vincendon, in 1961. He was devastated when she died of cancer in 1967. His fourth marriage, to Ghislaine de Boysson, began in 1973 and ended in 1979. His later years were darkened by the suicide of his daughter, Sappho-Jane, in 1985. His final work, *Caesar's Vast Ghost*, was published in 1990. Lawrence Durrell died on 7 November 1990.

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