

## The Story of Axel Munthe (1857-1949) and Broadway, Worcestershire



Figure 1: Axel Munthe aged 23 when studying in Paris

Many famous people have washed up in Broadway over the years, among them the Swedish medical doctor and psychiatrist Axel Munthe who was personal physician to Queen Victoria of Sweden and Norway ('Queen Victoria') from 1892.

Axel Munthe enjoyed international fame and celebrity throughout much of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was on intimate terms with the regal, the rich and the celebrated of his generation. Women found him irresistibly attractive and showered him with love letters and proposals of marriage. He was the original 'Marmite' man; loved or despised with equal passion. Queen Victoria and his second wife Hilda eventually found him attractive and repellent in equal measure and shared their opinions of him

in a lengthy correspondence.

Twenty year old Edith Balfour met him in 1885 when he was a passenger on the same ship as she and her family bound for Sweden from England. She wrote of him, "His personality was certainly picturesque, picturesque to influence all the males of the party against him and all the females in his favour...I think he is just vain and likes to make people fond of him." Her much older and close friend Maude Valerie White was so taken with him, though not romantically, that she taught herself Swedish and helped translate his early writing 'Letters from a Mourning City', from Swedish into English.<sup>1</sup>

Axel told Maude that he had been in Naples during the epidemic of cholera the previous year and was on his way to Lapland. He said he had collected his letters about the epidemic which had been published in Swedish. He said he would send her a copy although she would not understand a word of it. Maud spent the summer of 1885 holidaying in Switzerland with the Balfours. She translated the first few chapters which she sent to Axel and visited him twice in Paris where they read and translated the remainder together. The English edition entitled '*Letters from a Mourning City*' was published in the Spring of 1887, was well reviewed and Maud's translation praised.<sup>2</sup> We will meet Maud White again.



Figure 2: Maude Valerie White

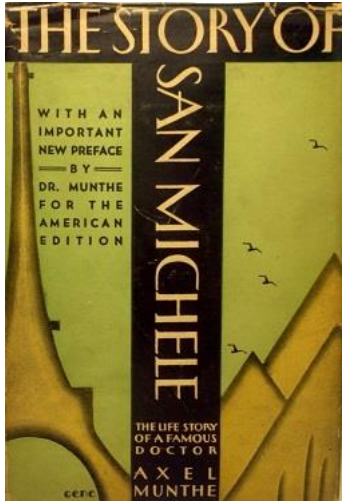
Axel recognised his magnetic attraction to his female patients: "I have discovered the secret and it is simply that I have a certain ability to lead people and they submit themselves, almost unconsciously to my will...sometimes it almost seems to me to be

<sup>1</sup> 'Axel Munthe The Road to San Michele', Bengt Jangfeldt 2008, p55

<sup>2</sup> 'Friends and Memories', Maude Valerie White, 1914 pps275, 306-7

demonic....”<sup>3</sup> At a time when women, whether married or single, were unused to unchaperoned contact with a man, the very direct approach of Axel Munthe acted like an aphrodisiac.

The star that was Axel Munthe has waned with the passage of time and he is best remembered, if at all, for his semi-autobiographical memoir *‘The Story of San Michele’* which was an international best-seller after its publication in May 1929 and remains one of the ten best-selling books published in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At its heart is Munthe’s



life long affinity with the island of Capri which he first visited as a young man of 19 in 1876<sup>4</sup> and where he was to restore and reside in a Villa which he named San Michele after the adjacent and ruined chapel of San Michele. The book is notable as much for what Munthe omitted as what he included: he says nothing of his two marriages or his children. Indeed he described himself as single. Nor does he mention the time he spent in England.

Axel Munthe died in February 1949 aged 91 almost exactly 6 months before my birth. It was only after I moved to Broadway in 2014 that I discovered how, for a brief time, Axel’s life intersected with my own.

Figure 3: USA 1st Edition 1931

Axel’s father was a pharmacist and had his own chemist shop. The Stockholm branch of the family owned Beateborg, a manor house outside the capital, at which Jenny Lind the renowned opera singer was a frequent guest. Axel shared her passion for music and had lifelong interests in sailing and the protection of wildlife.<sup>5</sup>

In 1876 he contracted tuberculosis. He pursued his medical studies and enrolled at the medical faculty in Montpellier, France where the climate was conducive to his recovery. Between 1877 and spring 1880 he was in Paris where he completed his doctoral thesis on ‘Bleeding from the Womb after childbirth’.

At much the same time, Axel had fallen hopelessly in love with Sigrid von Mecklenburg an older, married woman with children and the first of the ‘impossible’ loves which were to be a feature of his life. In his misery he met and rapidly married in Paris on the 24<sup>th</sup> November 1880 Ultima Hornberg.<sup>6</sup>

The marriage was a disaster. According to Axel, the union was never consummated. He gave various explanations: that he remained in love with Sigrid; that he had had syphilis and did not wish to infect Ultima; that he was impotent.



Figure 4: Ultima Hornberg

<sup>3</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p165

<sup>4</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p15

<sup>5</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p11

<sup>6</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p22

Where the truth lay is impossible to say since, “his ambition is to appear in a favourable light [such] that he tells everyone a different version of the same story.”<sup>7</sup> The couple were divorced in March 1888.

Meanwhile, in 1881 Axel spent much of his time on Capri. In March there was a typhus epidemic. Axel worked as a volunteer doctor giving his services free of charge. He contracted the disease himself but recovered. In the Spring of 1889 there was an outbreak of smallpox on Capri. Again he treated its victims without charge. He became and remained a hero to the local population.

In October 1889 Axel left Capri and moved to Rome where he intended to establish himself as a doctor. He took a house hard by the Spanish Steps where Keats had lived with his friend Joseph Severn for three months before dying of consumption in February 1821. He rapidly built a very successful practice among the rich and titled foreigners living in and visiting Rome.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 5: Axel Munthe on Capri in 1888



Figure 6: View from the Keats/Severn house in Rome by Charles Coleman who lived there for many years up to the mid 1880's and visited the Millets in Broadway in 1902

Between 1889 and 1901 Axel divided his time between Rome and Capri. A visitor to the house in Rome in December 1894 wrote, “He lives by the Spanish Steps in the apartment where the English poet Keats died; Shelley lived above him. When you enter Munthe’s apartment Keats’ and Shelley’s poems are lying open, just by chance. Both are bound in de luxe binding of the utmost elegance.”<sup>9</sup>

It had been in May 1894 that William Morris’s Kelmscott Press published its edition of Keats poems. Axel had visited London and the Isle of Wight in the 1890’s. Perhaps he acquired a copy of the Kelmscott edition.

In May 1891, at home on Capri, Axel first encountered Crown Princess [later Queen] Victoria of Sweden and Norway. She invited him to breakfast and for a medical consultation. She was married to Crown Prince Gustav. It was and remained an unhappy marriage. Axel and Queen Victoria became close, probably intimate. In 1903 his position was formalised when he was appointed ‘physician in ordinary’ to Queen Victoria and was required to spend more time with her wherever she might be. It was for Axel Munthe, another impossible



Figure 7: Axel and Queen Victoria on a boat trip off Capri

<sup>7</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p91

<sup>8</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p120

<sup>9</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’ p146

relationship and the inference is compelling that the absence of complete commitment was precisely what he wanted. The relationship was eventually tolerated by the Prince. It gave him the freedom to do as he wished and it kept his wife happy.

In June 1895 Axel bought a ruined house on a hill in Anacapri [the village on the hill overlooking Capri] and the adjoining chapel of San Michele which was to become the Villa San Michele. Renovation works were not complete until 1899. One of the first visitors in October 1897 was Oscar Wilde in company with his friend Lord Alfred Douglas. Wilde was very recently released from a two year prison sentence for gross indecency. Axel was unconcerned by Wilde's difficulties. Of Axel, Wilde wrote, "he is a great connoisseur of Greek things. He is a wonderful personality."<sup>10</sup>



Figure 8: Modern view of San Michele

The first person to visit and comment upon the completed Villa San Michele was the American author Henry James who was Axel's guest on the 13<sup>th</sup> June 1899. This happened to be the *fiesta di sant' Antonio*, "the greatest day in the year for Anacapri"<sup>11</sup> and as the procession passed

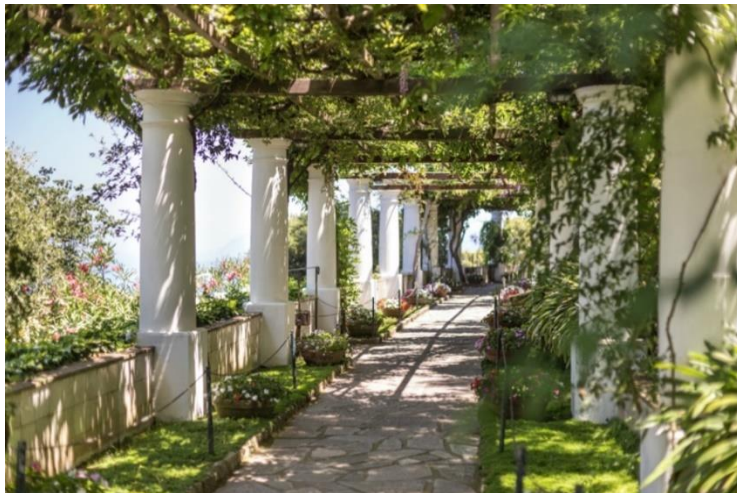


Figure 9: Pergola at Villa San Michele

Villa San Michele Henry James looked down from his bedroom window shaking with laughter, in his pyjamas.<sup>12</sup> Axel had met Henry James that spring in Rome and had invited him to the Villa. Of the Villa James wrote that it was "a creation of the most fantastic beauty, poetry and inutility I have ever seen clustered together." He admired Axel's "unnatural simplicity."<sup>13</sup>

It was in 1907 that the events took place that were to bring Axel Munthe to the village of Broadway in Worcestershire. Axel described what had occurred with typical matter of factness in a letter to Baroness Ebba Akerheim. He said he had been trying in vain for two years to find someone to be with him and who could read to him and "after long indecision [I have] accepted the generous offer made to me by a good woman...to marry me and help me. Since I lost my eye she has learnt Swedish in order to help me. I have taken a house in England

<sup>10</sup> 'Axel Munthe' p156

<sup>11</sup> 'The Story of San Michele', Axel Munthe, 1975 p338

<sup>12</sup> 'The Story of San Michele' p343

<sup>13</sup> 'Axel Munthe p157

from September and shall begin my new life...I was married in London a month ago. She is clever and good and a lady.” Thus did Axel describe the English aristocrat Hilda Pennington-Mellor who became his second wife.

The Pennington-Mellors were wealthy. Their money came from cotton plantations in Egypt and merchant ships trading between Brazil and England. They were part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century jet set. When Hilda had done the Grand Tour it was from the comfort of the family’s own railway carriage. They owned an imposing Tudor style house in Biarritz.<sup>14</sup>

Hilda adored Axel and was prepared to marry him on his terms. He made it clear to her that he was only prepared to spend half of each year with her. Her response was to write, “I want to be near you even for a small tiny bit each day.”<sup>15</sup> Her parents were appalled at the prospect of the marriage. Axel’s reputation as a womaniser was well known and he was 50 and Hilda only 31. “Hilda’s parents, though sophisticated and liberal minded were aghast at her choice...but Hilda was determined to marry Axel.”<sup>16</sup>



Figure 10: Hilda Pennington-Mellor

Axel and Hilda married on the 16<sup>th</sup> May 1907 in bizarre circumstances. Axel arrived in London by train at 10.00 from Baden Baden [where he had been with an unwell Princess Victoria] on the morning of the ceremony and returned, alone, that same afternoon. The ceremony took place at St James’s Church, Paddington. It was a very small and unannounced event. The Pennington-Mellors were clearly embarrassed by the whole affair. It was not until the 17<sup>th</sup> July that a small advertisement appeared in the Times (and the Daily Mirror!) publicising the marriage.<sup>17</sup>

By this time Hilda and Axel were safely out of England and honeymooning in Scandinavia. When they returned it was to live at 31 St James Place in the heart of London which belonged to Hilda’s aunt.<sup>18</sup> However, the “house in England” to which Axel had referred in his letter to Baroness Akerheim was in Broadway. Axel’s biographer Bengt Jangfeldt states baldly,



Figure 11: The Malt House in July 2021

“...the Munthes also had another home

<sup>14</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p201

<sup>15</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p202

<sup>16</sup> “Sweet is War to them that know it not’, Malcom Munthe 1957, p187

<sup>17</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p202

<sup>18</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p204

in England, the Malt House in the village of Broadway in the Cotswolds.”<sup>19</sup> He says nothing of how or why they came to Broadway or what they did while they were here. His only other mention of Broadway is to record the fact that Munthe sold the Malt House in 1927 it having been rented out for many years.<sup>20</sup>

There is a compelling inference that it must have been either Henry James or Maud White or a combination of the two who recommended Broadway to Axel.

I have already noted James’ visit to Capri some years before. In 1914 James described Axel in a letter he wrote to Compton McKenzie as “my old admirable friend...”<sup>21</sup> and when, during World War I Axel contemplated applying for British citizenship James, who had himself been naturalised, offered to sponsor Axel.<sup>22</sup> They were clearly on good terms in 1907.

The association of Henry James with the ‘Artists Colony’ in Broadway is well known. In 1889 he described Broadway as, “a very old English village, lying amongst its meadows and hedges, in the very heart of the country, in the hollow of the green hills of Worcestershire...the perfection of the old English rural tradition.”<sup>23</sup> More importantly, it had been to Broadway that James had come to write. In 1886 Gosse, a member of the colony, wrote, “...in the morning Henry James and I would write, while Abbey and Millet painted on the floor below, and Sargent and Parsons tilted their easels just outside....Henry James was the only sedate one of all – benign, indulgent but grave, and not often unbending beyond a genial chuckle.”<sup>24</sup>



Figure 12: Henry James by John Singer Sargent

Broadway as somewhere to write would have appealed to Axel. In *‘The Story of San Michele’* he claims that in June 1899 Henry James encouraged him to write the memoir that he had long contemplated.<sup>25</sup>

We last encountered Maud White as the translator of *‘Letters from a Mourning City’*. Like Axel, she is now a largely forgotten figure. In the late Victorian and early Edwardian period she was one of the most successful songwriters in the English serious style. A considerable linguist, she set many poems in German and English to music. In 1879 she was the first woman to be awarded the prestigious Mendelssohn Scholarship. One of the judges was Arthur Sullivan. After the competition she took a

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p205

<sup>20</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p256

<sup>21</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p269

<sup>22</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p226

<sup>23</sup> [Frank Millet Archives - Cotswold Holiday Cottages at The Manor House, Broadway](http://frankmilletarchives.com/cotswold-holiday-cottages-at-the-manor-house-broadway) ([broadwaymanor.co.uk](http://broadwaymanor.co.uk))

<sup>24</sup> [The Broadway Group of Artists in the Cotswolds](http://www.broadwaymanor.co.uk/the-broadway-group-of-artists-in-the-cotswolds)

<sup>25</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p268

hansom cab home and told her mother she had won: “how she hugged me. I forgot to pay the cab and three hours later he knocked at the door.”<sup>26</sup>

In the winter of 1887 Maud was introduced to the American actress Mary Anderson who was to become one of Broadway’s most famous residents. Mary was acting in the *‘Winter’s Tale’* at the Lyceum.<sup>27</sup> They became good friends.

In 1893 Mary, now Mrs de Navarro and her husband were staying at the Lygon Arms in Broadway whilst visiting the Millets. Mary invited Maud to join them. A few days later the two women came across two neighbouring farmhouses at the foot of



Figure 13: Maud Valerie White awaits departure of Knights Coach for journey from Broadway to Evesham station

Broadway Hill. Both were for sale. Maud purchased ‘Bell Farm’ and Mary ‘Court Farm’. Renovations were completed by Spring 1896 and Maud lived at ‘Bell Farm’ until 1901 when she moved to Sicily. She sold ‘Bell Farm’ to Mary de Navarro who constructed a music room to link the two houses. Maud visited Broadway every year with one exception up to 1914.<sup>28</sup>

There is evidence that Maud had continuing contact with Axel after the publication of *‘Letters from a Mourning City’*. It is entirely possible that he visited her in Broadway or that she wrote to him of her life there.

The arrival of Axel and Hilda in Broadway is described by Sid Knight in his autobiographical account of his childhood in Broadway published in 1960 after Sid had emigrated to Southern Africa.<sup>29</sup> As a schoolboy Sid had a part time job at a boarding house then called *‘Sunnyside’* on what is now the upper High Street (and now my home).



Figure 14: ‘Sunnyside’ is the ivy clad house second on the left

<sup>26</sup> ‘Friends and Memories’, p170

<sup>27</sup> Friends and Memories’, p313

<sup>28</sup> Friends and Memories, p362 and 375; ‘A Few More Memories’, Mary Anderson 1936 p56

<sup>29</sup> ‘Cotswold Lad’, Sid Knight, 1960

The house was run by Mrs Charlotte Kendrick “a gentle and kind lady” who paid Sid a shilling a week. A general servant, Daisy, looked after the place and “received the usual pay of the time, £6 per year, “live in”.” Mrs Kendrick had bought Sunnyside in 1889 and lived there until her death in 1913. This was the house which I was to buy in July 2014. By then it had lost the name ‘Sunnyside’. Some years later a previous owner presented me with a bundle of historic conveyances from which I discovered the earlier name and associated it with Sid Knight’s account which I had previously read.

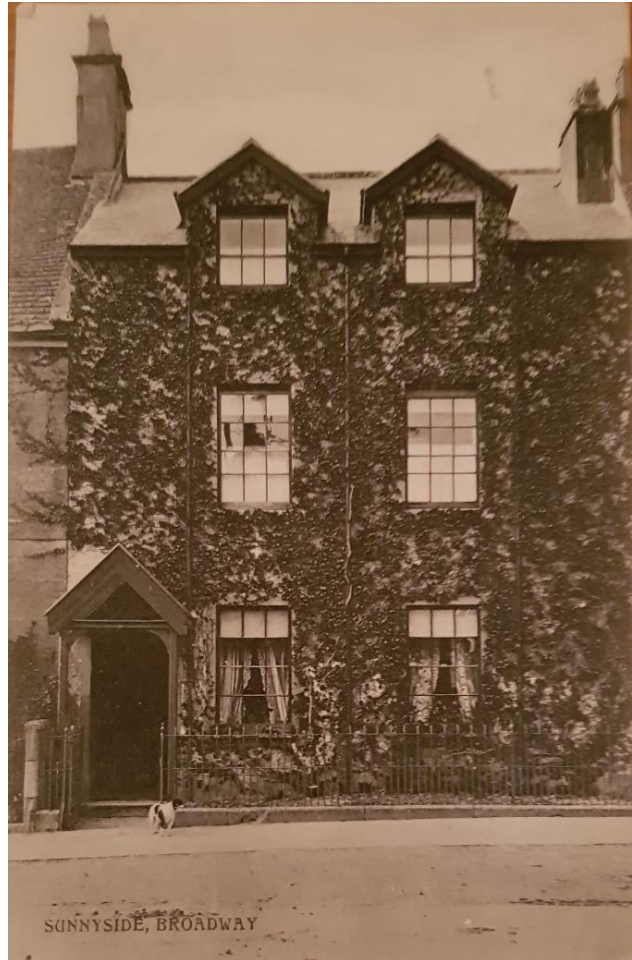


Figure 15: A postcard of 'Sunnyside' sent by Charlotte Kendrick in 1908

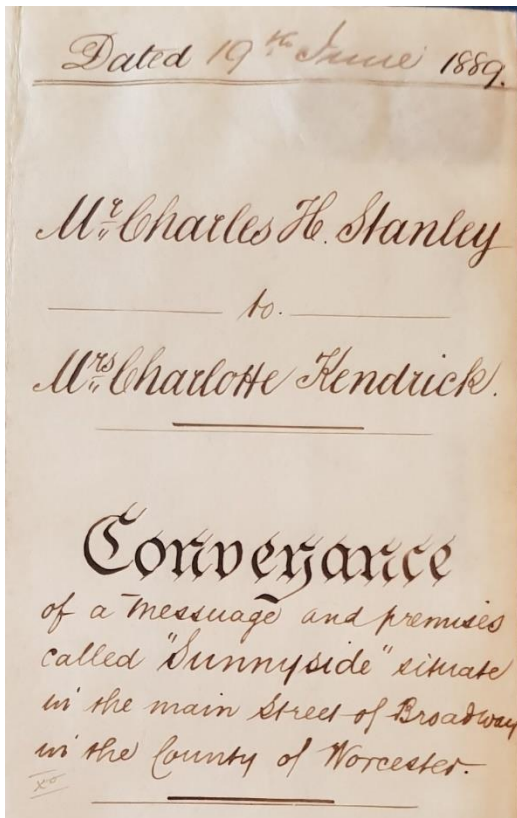


Figure 16: Conveyance of 'Sunnyside' to Charlotte Kendrick

Sid takes up the story of Dr. Munthe’s arrival. “Presently the rumbling of wheels disturbed the quiet of the High Street as into view lumbered the station fly owned by the Lygon Arms Hotel, the top piled high with luggage bearing railway and hotel labels from all over Europe. The horse drawn four-wheeler came to a sedate halt alongside the grass verge and two imposing figures alighted. One was a woman who to my boyish mind was of unbelievable beauty and charm...followed by a tall, well-built man, a menacing figure in black...A black Homburg shaded his black spade beard, and down his face ran a deep scar (which) rumour said was caused by a falling chimney pot in Stockholm one dark, windy night...The strange man, who was addressed by everybody as ‘ Doctor’ dominated the scene as he gave instructions to



my father, who after finishing his postal round that afternoon had just emerged from the back of the house...”<sup>30</sup>

Sid Knight continued his story: “Later on as I helped Daisy wash up at the kitchen sink she told me that the Doctor and his much younger bride were on their honeymoon, although she whispered that this was his third wife, and that he was a very famous man indeed....Nearly thirty years later I was to recall his arrival at Sunnyside when I eagerly read in a lonely part of the Transvaal his world-famous book, ‘*The Story of San Michele*’, although there was no mention of Broadway in it.”<sup>31</sup>

It is doubtful that Daisy was right about this being part of the honeymoon or Hilda being a third wife but it all made for interesting tittle tattle. After a period lodging at Sunnyside Sid relates that Dr Munthe and his wife settled at the Malt House towards the top of the High Street “a few houses down the street from the home of the accomplished California-born actress, Mary Anderson, who was a great friend of his. I helped Dad unpack the heavy crates of furniture that came down from London.”<sup>32</sup>

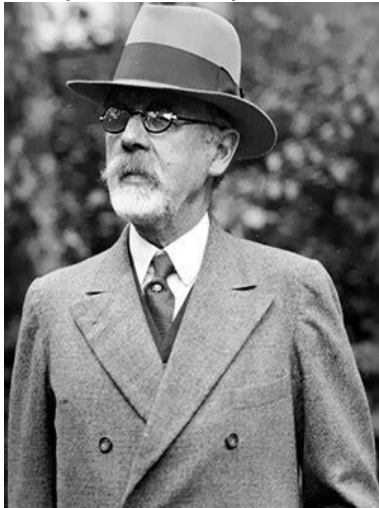


Figure 17: Axel Munthe in his trademark Homburg

Sid worked as houseboy for the Munthes when work was slack at Sunnyside: “Every morning I had to clean the doctor’s boots...with some evil smelling liquid blacking that must have been the same as Charles Dickens packed in his young days at the blacking factory.” According to Sid, his cousin Ada was cook to Axel and Hilda for many years and travelled all over Europe with them. If so, she was not with the family on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1911 when the census was taken. At home at the Malt House were Hilda, her two sons Peter and Malcolm, three servants and two visitors from France. There is no trace of Axel in the United Kingdom on that day.

Evidence of Axel and Hilda’s life in Broadway is scant. In the second volume of her memoirs, ‘*A Few More Memories*’ Mary Anderson refers to Axel. It seems quite likely that Mary would have known of and been introduced to Axel by Maude White and perhaps also by Countess Valda Gleichen. As we shall discover, Axel was acquainted with the three Gleichen sisters Helena, Feodora and Valda. Valda was an accomplished singer and took part in a concert in Broadway organised by Mary at which Maud White also played.<sup>33</sup> Mary was also a close friend of Henry James.

Mary Anderson records dining one “beautiful June evening by the fountain” in the garden at ‘Court Farm’ with a group of friends who included “Dr Axel Munthe, who was a neighbour and his wife, a very special friend of mine.” Later she writes, “Axel Munthe lived nearby; his lovely, cultured wife to whom I am devoted ordered from Naples a

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<sup>30</sup> ‘Cotswold Lad’, p39

<sup>31</sup> ‘Cotswold Lad’, p40

<sup>32</sup> ‘Cotswold Lad’, p41

<sup>33</sup> ‘A Few More Memories’ p98

perfect copy in bronze of Verrocchio's Putto in the *cortile* of the Palazzo Vecchio at Florence."<sup>34</sup>

At the top of Fish Hill between Broadway and Chipping Camden was Willersey Hill farmhouse which prior to World War I was occupied by the Cotterell family. Later the farmhouse became a bed and breakfast before being bought by the Danish Sorenson family in 1977 after which it was remodelled as the Dormy House Hotel. Axel Munthe was a regular visitor to the Cotterells prior to the War.<sup>35</sup>

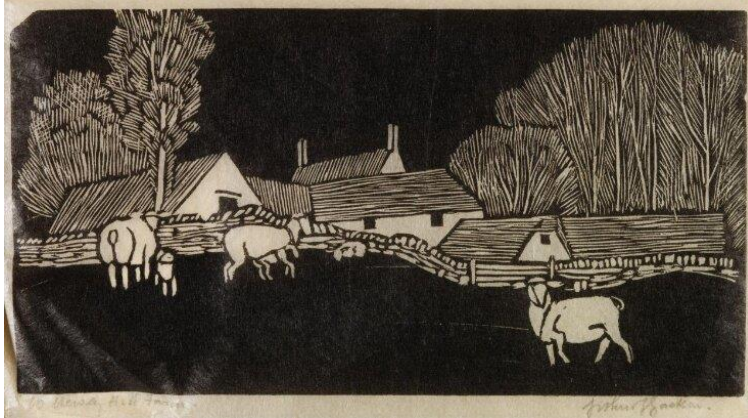


Figure 17 1920's woodcut of Willersey Hill Farm by Gaskin

was a regular visitor to the Cotterells prior to the War.<sup>35</sup>

Axel and Hilda commuted between their various homes in London, Broadway, Capri, Biarritz and Sweden. Both their sons, Peter born on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1908 and Malcolm on the 30<sup>th</sup> January 1910 were delivered in London.

At the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 Axel and his family were in Sweden. Sweden was officially neutral but public opinion was strongly pro-German. Axel was pro-British and so in September the family moved to London and Axel abandoned his post with Queen Victoria for the duration of the War.<sup>36</sup> He gave distinguished service to the Allied cause: in 1914 he worked as an anaesthetist with an ambulance in France. In 1915 and 1916 he spent a total of 9 months at the front as a field Doctor for the French Red Cross and was present at battles at Verdun, the Somme and Arras.<sup>37</sup>

In June 1916 Axel published '*Red Cross and Iron Cross*' a fictionalised account of three days and nights in a village on the French eastern front in which the Germans are portrayed as cold blooded and brutal and the British as noble and brave. The book was a great success and went through five editions in as many months with all proceeds going to the French Red Cross."<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, the Malt House in Broadway was let to Mary Anderson's mother.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> 'A Few More Memories', pps 169 and 255

<sup>35</sup> 'Evesham Journal', 28<sup>th</sup> August 2012

<sup>36</sup> 'Axel Munthe', p224

<sup>37</sup> 'Axel Munthe', p225

<sup>38</sup> 'The Road to San Michele', p228

<sup>39</sup> 'A Few More Memories', p147



Figure 19: Axel Munthe in Red Cross uniform

On the 25<sup>th</sup> September 1915 Lieutenant John Kipling son of Nobel literature prize winner Rudyard Kipling was killed in action near Loos. His body was not recovered and he was listed as missing believed killed. Rudyard was beside himself with grief and tortured by the uncertainty of what had happened to his only son. He clung to the hope that he was alive and a prisoner. He approached the Swedish royal family in the hope that their direct contact with the Kaiser might assist.<sup>40</sup> It is tempting to infer that his friend Henry James might have suggested Axel as a conduit through which to establish contact with the Swedes.

During the war Axel, Hilda and their sons spent time together between his periods of service. They wintered on Capri and also visited England and Biarritz. However, by the end of the War the marriage was under considerable strain. He was to claim that they had not had sex since before the war, that she was jealous and accused every woman he met of being his mistress. In particular she complained of what she believed were his inappropriate relationships with various servant girls and female companions on Capri. In February 1919 Hilda left him for good and took the boys with her. Axel said he would keep aloof from the boys: "They do not care the least for me so they will not mind in the least." It was however agreed that there would be no divorce.<sup>41</sup>

Confirmation of the separation comes from Sid Knight who recalled that towards the end of World War I his father, the village postman, was sweeping his yard when an "elegant, richly attired lady leading a little boy, stopped and called out to him... "You probably won't remember me but for sentimental reasons I have just come for the day to have a look at the dear old village and its happy memories. I am Mrs Axel Munthe, although (her eyes filling with tears) we are now separated.""<sup>42</sup> The boy was likely her younger son Malcolm who was to play a heroic part in World War II.

In the summer of 1920 Axel inadvertently acquired an impecunious but leech like tenant at Villa San Michele. Marchesa Luisa Casati owned a house in Venice later acquired by Peggy Guggenheim and now a museum. Her scandalous behaviour earned her considerable notoriety. "During her nightly promenades in St. Marks Square a black footman bore great torches to illuminate the Marchesa, who was stark naked under a voluminous fur coat, and her two hunting leopards. Known for having more perfume than clothes on her body, nakedness was an important part of her image."<sup>43</sup> She arrived on Capri with her footman, the leopards, two greyhounds, two gilded gazelles, a couple of parrots, a boa constrictor and [less exotically] an owl. She

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<sup>40</sup> 'How the Just So Stories were Made', John Batchelor 2021,

p164

<sup>41</sup> 'Axel Munthe', p238

<sup>42</sup> 'Cotswold Lad', p42

<sup>43</sup> 'Axel Munthe', p242

would not leave and her payment of the rent was irregular and always very late. She remained for most of the 1920's.

Meanwhile Hilda spent considerable periods at the family home 'Hildasholm' (Hilda's house) at Leksand, north of Stockholm which Axel had built for her in 1910. She was sometimes the guest of Queen Victoria and the two struck up an unlikely but deep friendship. In September 1925 Axel visited Leksand and, for the first time in seven years, saw his two sons who were now 18 and 16. Afterwards he wrote and sent money: "Give my love to your mother and thank her for the happy days I spent with her and you."<sup>44</sup> In the autumn of 1928 Hilda and boys moved to Stockholm and the boys enrolled at the University.



Figure 20: Luisa Casati

In May 1929 came the defining moment of Axel's life; the publication of '*The Story of San Michele*.' Axel was in Rome with Queen Victoria who wrote to Hilda, "he is childishly happy about it, though he professes not to care."<sup>45</sup> Axel was a master of simulated modesty!

The book was a slow burning success but in June a glowing review in the *Observer* newspaper propelled it into the public consciousness. The reviewer wrote, "Seldom have I read anything more moving, tender or more full of human respect. It has style, wit, humour...a strange simplicity that is often the attribute of genius." By the end of the year the book had gone through six English editions.<sup>46</sup>

John Galsworthy wrote to Axel "that the book was an amazing record – quite inspiring in many ways."<sup>47</sup> For Axel's biographer "The Story of San Michele is a blend of fiction and philosophy, of melodramatic cock-and-bull stories with varying degrees of verisimilitude..."<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless it was an international publishing sensation.

The near 40 year relationship between Axel and Queen Victoria ended on the 4<sup>th</sup> April 1930. She died in Rome with Axel at her bedside. Her last words to him were, "Come soon".<sup>49</sup> It was to be a further 17 years before he joined her. Hilda was present at the interment in Stockholm. In later years it had been compassion which Axel had felt for Queen Victoria. As he wrote in the '*Story of San Michele*', "The only people I really liked were those I felt sorry for."<sup>50</sup>

In the 1930's Axel spent more and more time in London. He had his mail sent to the St James Club. Hilda and the boys spent their summers in Sweden. In August 1933 Axel was the guest of Gavin Henderson at his house on Corsica to which he had

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<sup>44</sup> 'Axel Munthe', p254

<sup>45</sup> 'Axel Munthe', p265

<sup>46</sup> 'Axel Munthe', p267

<sup>47</sup> 'Axel Munthe', p270

<sup>48</sup> 'Axel Munthe', p288

<sup>49</sup> 'Axel Munthe', p274

<sup>50</sup> 'Axel Munthe', p278

travelled from Capri. How their paths had crossed is not known but Gavin was enormously wealthy and the following year was to inherit a title and become the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lord Farringdon and live out his life at Buscot Park near Lechlade.<sup>51</sup> In January 1937 Axel was at the Villa on Capri when Herman Goering came to call. Axel gave him a



Figure 21: Goering with Axel Munthe on Capri

tour of the Villa. Goering admired the art work, perhaps for later reference! Axel recalled that, “he made a far better impression on me than I had expected.”<sup>52</sup>

During World War II Axel was trapped in Sweden for much of the time, unable to get to England or Capri and enduring the cold winters. He sent large sums to Capri to support the poor. Each week he lunched with

King Gustav, the widower of Queen Victoria. Axel had a suite of rooms at the Palace. He remained in those rooms after the War. In early 1949 he was unwell with pneumonia and the two boys came to visit him. However, he recovered and in Hilda’s last letter to him she wrote, “I could not come back but I only think of you gently and with balance and proportion in all that happened in this wonderful adventure we call life...I hope that you will live on since you do not want to die but I know you are safe if you go. With my love, Hilda.”<sup>53</sup>

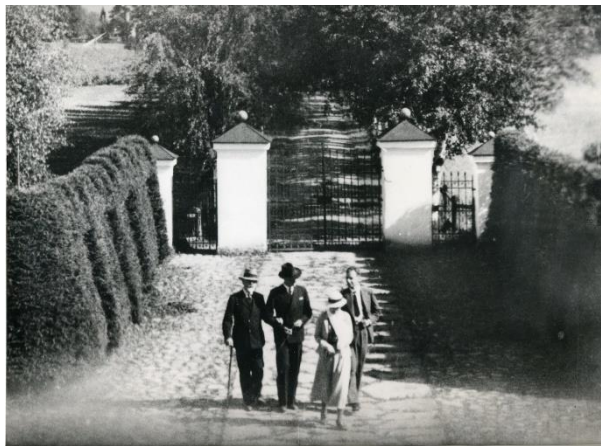


Figure 18: Axel, Malcolm, Hilda and Peter Munthe at Hildasholm

In fact it was only a month later on the 11<sup>th</sup> February 1949 that Axel died. His funeral on the 17<sup>th</sup> February was attended by Peter and Malcolm but not Hilda.

Axel Munthe was a maelstrom of contradictions. A recluse who liked to live among the great and the good over whom he could exercise his influence; a man who doctored to the poor for nothing and gave vast sums to charities but collected expensive antiques and owned sumptuous houses; a man who liked to eat simple food, expensively served. To his son Malcolm he was “full of inconsistencies, yet as simple as home-made bread.”<sup>54</sup> In a letter written at the end of 1949 his widow Hilda summed him up: “I always wonder when people say he was so complex and

<sup>51</sup> ‘Portrait of a Rebel Peer’, Roger Vlitos p117

<sup>52</sup> Axel Munthe’, p323

<sup>53</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p349

<sup>54</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p290

impossible to understand. He was as simple as a wayward child in spite of his very complete intelligence.”<sup>55</sup>

A few days after the funeral Peter and Malcolm scattered his ashes into a storm tossed sea off the west coast of Sweden.

There are two important and interlinked postscripts to the life story of Axel Munthe.

At Much Marcle in Herefordshire, no more than an hour’s drive from Broadway, is the ancient Manor House of ‘*Hellens*’.

The Manor returns us to the three Gleichen sisters, Helena, Feodora and Valda. Unusually, their father Prince Victor Hohenlohe-Langenburg encouraged each of them to pursue artistic careers “as if we had been boys.” Helena trained as an artist and was principally a painter of animals although two paintings of



Figure 23 ‘*Hellens*’

war scenes hang in the Imperial War Museum in London. Feodora was (like her father after he left the Royal Navy) a sculptor and Valda, as already noted, was a singer. Helena gave heroic service in World War I in the X-Ray section on the Italian Front and was awarded the Medal of Valour for “courage, intrepidity and contempt of danger.”<sup>56</sup> After the War she and her close friend Nina Hollings purchased a house in South Wales. She painted many pictures drawn from her memories of the War and had one woman shows, for example at the Birmingham Municipal Art Gallery. By 1931, they were on the lookout for a new home.

“It took us some time to find the house of our dreams....coming back late one evening from a fruitless search in Worcestershire....we stopped at a garage on the Ledbury-Ross road to fill up with petrol....asked of any empty house nearby...we turned up the lane indicated by the boy (to Hellens)...overcome with the beauty of it...What a house and what a situation looking across fields to the distant Malvern hills which were quite visible, so bright was the moon. Hellens became ours and for nine blissful years we have lived in it.”

Her purchase of ‘*Hellens*’ is confirmed by an article which appeared in the Dundee Courier on the 28<sup>th</sup> February 1931. She was it said, “going into residence in a few days time.”

Lady Helena met Axel Munthe in 1904. However, he received scant mention in her Memoir. After recalling an unpleasant encounter with cattle in Denmark she notes, “Dr Axel Munthe told me that there are more people killed by cattle in Denmark and Sweden than die from any other cause.”<sup>57</sup> Malcolm, the younger son of Axel and Hilda

<sup>55</sup> ‘Axel Munthe’, p353

<sup>56</sup> ‘Contacts and Contrasts’, Helena Gleichen 1940, new edition with introduction by Caroline Stone, 2013, pix

<sup>57</sup> ‘Contacts and Contrasts’, p69

was to claim that he and his brother Peter visited Helena’s studio and implies that this was at Hellens: “In years to come they took their children to the artist Helena’s studio. I can still remember the awe that place inspired in my brother and myself, as small boys.”<sup>58</sup> This cannot be correct. Helena did not acquire Hellens until Malcolm was 21. Perhaps he is confusing Hellens with the house that Helena’s mother rented in Ebrington, near Chipping Campden from 1903<sup>59</sup> or Helena’s father’s former studio in St James’s Palace from which she worked.<sup>60</sup> Helena became one of Europe’s finest painters of horses. In the 1920’s one or other of Feodora or Helena produced the pastel portrait of Axel which was used as the frontispiece of *‘The Story of San Michele’*.



Figure 24: Pastel of Axel Munthe

Both the book in all its editions and Malcolm Munthe attribute it to Feodora as does Caroline Stone in her introduction to the 2013 edition of Helena Gleichen’s memoir.<sup>61</sup> However, an inventory compiled for ‘Hellens’ from lists produced by the Courtald Institute and Sothebys attribute it to Helena.

How the Pennington-Mellor-Munthe family came to acquire ‘Hellens’ is shrouded in some mystery. In Malcolm Munthe’s account of the history of ‘Hellens’ originally published in 1957 he implies that Hilda inherited it following the death of Helena in about 1941: “Hilda Pennington-Munthe was Hellens’ sole mistress.”<sup>62</sup> This myth was puffed in an article about ‘Hellens’

which appeared in *‘The Sketch’* on the 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1957 where the author reports that Lady Helena Gleichen purchased ‘Hellens’ in 1900 and “Next, Mrs Axel Munthe inherited Hellens and has now made it over to her son, Major Malcolm Munthe.” Given the appearance of this article at the same time as the publication of Malcolm’s book, it must be that he was the source of the information in the article.

However, recent investigation of the Gleichen archive has revealed correspondence written by Helena in June 1943 in which she asserts that she had sold ‘Hellens’ to Malcolm Munthe and was moving to a house in Malmesbury. The letter is clear that she knew Axel Munthe but implies that she had not previously met or known of Hilda or her two sons. If true this casts doubt on Malcolm’s account of his childhood visits to ‘Hellens’ or indeed any House occupied by the Gleichens and renders him as unreliable an historian as his father! Certain it is that Helena did not die until the 28<sup>th</sup> January 1947 at which time she was living at Ashmead House, Cam near Dursley in Gloucestershire. Her memorial service took place on the 21<sup>st</sup> February at Cam parish church.<sup>63</sup>

This was not the first time Malcolm Munthe had ventured into print. Between 1944 and 1946 he spent two years convalescing in various hospitals and at home recovering

<sup>58</sup> ‘Hellens’, the story of a Herefordshire Manor’, p109

<sup>59</sup> ‘Contacts and Contrasts’, p41

<sup>60</sup> ‘Lady Helena Gleichen’, Wikipedia

<sup>61</sup> ‘Contacts and Contrasts’, pvi

<sup>62</sup> ‘Hellens, the story of a Herefordshire Manor’, p116

<sup>63</sup> ‘Gloucester Citizen’, 30<sup>th</sup> January 1947

from wounds suffered when fighting in Italy. He spent some of that time piecing together his imperfect recollections of his service during World War II. He began in the Military Hospital in Algiers to which he had been evacuated. Initially the wounds to his hands and eye prevented him writing and his bedside neighbour, who had lost the lower part of his face and was struggling to find the courage to write to his wife and tell her his lips had gone, took it down for him. It was eventually published in 1954 as *"Sweet is War to them that know it Not"*.

In 1939 Malcolm was a Conservative party candidate for the forthcoming general election. In July, when it appeared that war was inevitable he joined the Gordon Highlanders. By 1940 the War Department had discovered his knowledge of Scandinavia and that he could speak Swedish. He was promoted to Major and sent to Norway to accompany supplies of aircraft, tanks and other weapons intended for the Finns who had been invaded by the Russians. He got no further than the Finnish/Norwegian border before the Finns surrendered. He made for Bergen in an attempt to get a ship back to England. He was shot in both legs during a skirmish and after many months of travel he eventually escaped to Sweden.



Figure 19: Malcolm Munthe

In 1941 he was appointed Military Attache in Stockholm. He organised resistance groups in Sweden and Norway. Railways were blown up. Eventually the Swedes learnt of his role and he was expelled.

In 1942 back in London he organised Norwegian resistance fighters who were parachuted or taken by boat into Norway to tie up German forces and commit acts of sabotage.

In 1943 he persuaded his mother Hilda to leave their London home and relocate to Much Marcle. He himself was ordered to North Africa. On the 5<sup>th</sup> June 1943 he led a Special Operations Executive Unit which landed at Syracuse in Sicily. After Sicily was liberated he led his unit in the invasion of mainland Italy from Salerno and was involved in prolonged and furious fighting. His

19 year old radio operator Harry Hargreaves recalled in an interview for the Imperial War Museum in 1991 that Malcolm Munthe was "a cool customer and crafty as a bag of monkeys."<sup>64</sup> By an extraordinary coincidence he found himself involved in the liberation of Capri and was present when an American destroyer arrived under the command of Lieutenant-Commander Douglas Fairbanks Jnr. In 1930 it had been Fairbanks' father who had advised Axel Munthe on negotiations for the sale of the film rights to *'The Story of San Michele'*<sup>65</sup> The negotiations foundered. Axel wanted too much money.

In 1944 Malcolm led his unit in the landings at Anzio. They were tasked with penetrating enemy lines to make contact with partisans in Rome. Malcolm was badly

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<sup>64</sup> [SOE and Mussolini's Italy | Imperial War Museums Blog \(iwm.org.uk\)](https://www.iwm.org.uk/blogs/2014/05/soe-and-mussolini-s-italy)

<sup>65</sup> 'Axel Munthe', p306



injured by an artillery shell. He woke up in a US field hospital from where he was evacuated to Algiers. He was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry.

After the war the family homes at 'Hellens' and in Sweden were opened to the public as was Southside House, the family home in London described as "an enchantingly eccentric backdrop to the lives and loves of the Pennington Mellor Munthe families."<sup>66</sup> Malcolm died in 1995. In 2011 there was a serious fire at Southside House. In the course of renovations the hearthstone in the dining room fireplace was moved and beneath were wooden steps to a secret basement. In this room was a trunk which when opened revealed guns and ammunition, including a Colt 45 pistol, a Sten submachine gun and magazines for an M1 carbine rifle.<sup>67</sup> Malcolm was taking no chances and remained ready for action.

In my voyage around the life of Axel Munthe I left until last the acquiring and reading of *'The Story of San Michele'* itself. It contains not a single date. By and large he ignores the great and good in favour of the poor and humble who littered his life; the victims of disaster and disease, the ordinary folk of Capri and his servants. Not only does he omit any reference to his two wives and his children but Queen Victoria of Sweden who, to an outsider, appears a pivotal and ever present figure in his life for 40 years receives a single aside in his entertaining account of Miss Hall, an elderly spinster who inserted herself into his life in Rome: "One day as Miss Hall was walking with the dogs in the Villa Borghese a lady with a black poodle on her lap signalled to her to come up to her carriage. The lady patted the Lapland dog and said it was she who had given 'Tappio' as a tiny puppy to the Doctor. Miss Hall felt her knees shaking under her, it was HRH the Crown Princess of Sweden!"<sup>68</sup>

He says not a word of Broadway, 'Hellens' or of England. A connection is only established by noting that the original 1930 preface and the additional preface of 1936 are addressed from the St James's Club.

*'The Story of San Michele'* is not a mere historical curiosity. It retains much of the power, passion and skilled story telling which endeared it to its earlier readers. Axel Munthe can turn a beautiful phrase. His description of his cadaverous Swedish housekeeper Mamsell Agata is a delight.<sup>69</sup> She ruled his apartment in Paris with a rod of iron. He and the housemaid Rosalie "both lived in deadly fear of her." She cleaned ferociously: "If Mamsell Agata had been born four hundred years earlier no trace of medieval art would have remained today" he observed as she rubbed and scrubbed his dainty Louis XVI chairs. "Mamsell Agata only spoke Swedish but quarrelled fluently in French and English."

When Axel Munthe and Hilda arrived in Broadway the Guild of Handicraft still survived in Chipping Campden. Memories of William Morris were still strong and the Arts and Crafts movement flourished. The Arts and Crafts ethos had its impact on Axel. He

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<sup>66</sup> [HISTORY \(southsidehouse.com\)](http://HISTORY(southsidehouse.com))

<sup>67</sup> [Man who stashed war weapons in Wimbledon Southside House was WWII spy Malcolm Munthe | Your Local Guardian](#)

<sup>68</sup> 'The Story of San Michele' p292

<sup>69</sup> 'The Story of San Michele' p162

describes a return to San Michele after a long absence: “As I saw it again I thought San Michele looked more beautiful than ever. The house was small, the rooms were few but there were loggias, terraces and pergolas all around it to watch the sun, the sea and the clouds – the soul needs more space than the body. Not much furniture in the rooms but what there was could not be bought with money alone. Nothing superfluous, nothing unbeautiful, no bric-a-brac, no trinkets. A few primitive pictures, an etching of Durer and a Greek bas-relief on the whitewashed walls.”<sup>70</sup> Surely, Morris would have approved.

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