

The Story of Axel Munthe and Broadway, Worcestershire

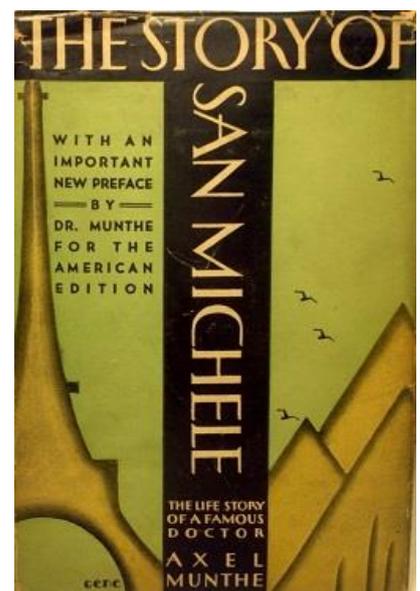
Many famous people have washed up in Broadway over the years, among them the Swedish medical doctor and psychiatrist Axel Munthe, who was personal physician to Queen Victoria of Sweden from 1892.

Axel Munthe enjoyed international fame and celebrity throughout much of the first half of the 20th 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 of Sweden and his second wife Hilda eventually found him both attractive and repellent and shared their opinions of him in a lengthy correspondence.

Edith May met him in 1885 and 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 friend Maude White was so infatuated with him that she taught herself Swedish and helped translate his early writings, in particular *Letters from a Mourning City*, into English.¹

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 demonic...."² 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 of the 20th 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 1876³ and where he was to restore and reside in a Villa which he named San Michele after the adjacent and also ruined chapel of San Michele. The book is notable as much for what Munthe omitted as what he included: he says



¹ 'Axel Munthe The Road to San Michele', Bengt Jangfeldt 2008, p55

² 'Axel Munthe', p165

³ 'Axel Munthe', p15

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.

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.⁴

In 1876 he contracted tuberculosis 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'.



Axel Munthe at the outset of his medical career, (copyright Villa San Michele)

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 24th November 1880 Ultima Hornberg.⁵

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. 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."⁶ The couple were divorced in March 1888.

⁴ 'Axel Munthe', p11

⁵ 'Axel Munthe', p22

⁶ 'Axel Munthe', p91



Ultima Hornburg, (copyright Villa San Michele)

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.⁷

Between 1889 and 1901 Axel divided his time between Rome and Capri. A visitor to the house in Rome wrote of his visit in December 1894, "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."⁸ 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.

It was in May 1891 that, 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. Their relationship became close, probably intimate and lifelong. In 1903 his position was formalised when he was appointed 'physician in ordinary' to Victoria and was required to spend more time with her wherever she might be. It was for Axel Munthe, another impossible 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

⁷ 'Axel Munthe', p120

⁸ 'Axel Munthe' p146

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."⁹

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 13th June 1899. This happened to be the *fiesta di sant' Antonio*, "the greatest day in the year for Anacapri"¹⁰ and as the procession passed Villa San Michele Henry James looked down from his bedroom window shaking with laughter, in his pyjamas.¹¹ 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."¹²

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 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 19th century jetset. 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.¹³

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."¹⁴ 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."¹⁵

Axel and Hilda married on the 16th May 1907 in bizarre circumstances. Axel arrived in London by train at 1000 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 a parish church near Hyde Park Terrace. It

⁹ 'Axel Munthe' p156

¹⁰ 'The Story of San Michele', Axel Munthe p338

¹¹ 'The Story of San Michele' p343

¹² 'Axel Munthe' p157

¹³ 'Axel Munthe', p201

¹⁴ 'Axel Munthe', p202

¹⁵ "Sweet is War to them that know it not", Malcom Munthe, p187

was a very small and unannounced event. The Pennington-Mellors were clearly embarrassed by the whole affair. It was not until the 17th July that a small advertisement appeared in the Times publicising the marriage.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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, "...the Munthes also had another home in England, the Malt House in the village of Broadway in the Cotswolds."¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

There is a compelling inference that it must have been Henry James 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..."²⁰ and when, during the First World War Axel contemplated applying for British citizenship, James, who had himself been naturalised, offered to sponsor Axel.²¹ 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."²² 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."²³

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.²⁴

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

¹⁶ 'Axel Munthe', p202

¹⁷ 'Axel Munthe', p204

¹⁸ 'Axel Munthe', p205

¹⁹ 'Axel Munthe', p256

²⁰ 'Axel Munthe', p269

²¹ 'Axel Munthe', p226

²² [Frank Millet Archives - Cotswold Holiday Cottages at The Manor House, Broadway \(broadwaymanor.co.uk\)](http://broadwaymanor.co.uk)

²³ [The Broadway Group of Artists in the Cotswolds](http://broadwaymanor.co.uk)

²⁴ 'Axel Munthe', p268

emigrated to Southern Africa.²⁵ 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).



A postcard of 'Sunnyside' posted in September 1908 and written by Charlotte Kendrick

The house was run by Mrs Charlotte Kendrick, "a gentle and kind lady", who paid Sid a shillings 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.

'Sunnyside' is the ivy clad building second up on the left hand side of the road



²⁵ 'Cotswold Lad', Sid Knight, 1960

Dated 19th June 1889.

M^r Charles H. Stanley

to.

M^{rs} Charlotte Kendrick.

Conveyance
of a messuage and premises
called "Sunnyside" situate
in the main street of Broadway
in the County of Worcester.

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



Axel Munthe in later life

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."²⁷

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."²⁸

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..."²⁶

A young Hilda Pennington Mellor



²⁶ 'Cotswold Lad', p39

²⁷ 'Cotswold Lad', p40

²⁸ 'Cotswold Lad', p41



The Malt House, High Street, Broadway July 2021

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.

Michael de Navarro, the grandson of Mary Anderson confirms that she recorded the Munthes living in the Malt House before WW1 in her second volume of memoirs.

At the top of Fish Hill between Broadway and Chipping Campden was Willersey Hill farmhouse which prior to WW1 was occupied by the Cotterell family. Later the farmhouse became a Bed and Breakfast before being bought by the Danish Sørensen family in 1977 after which it was remodelled as the Dormy House Hotel. Axel Munthe was a regular visitor of the Cotterells prior to the War.²⁹

Axel and Hilda commuted between their various homes in London, Broadway, Capri, Biarritz and Sweden. Both their sons, Peter born on 3rd April 1908 and Malcolm on the 30th 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.³⁰ 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.³¹

²⁹ ‘Evesham Journal’, 28th August 2012

³⁰ ‘Axel Munthe’, p224

³¹ ‘Axel Munthe’, p225

On the 25th 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.³² 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.³³

Confirmation of the separation comes from Sid Knight who recalled that towards the end of WW1 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."³⁴ The boy was likely her younger son Malcolm who was to play a heroic part in WW2.

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. Mark's 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."³⁵ 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 would not leave and her payment of the rent was irregular and always very late. She remained for most of the 1920s.

Meanwhile Hilda spent considerable periods at the family home Leksand, north of Stockholm. 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

³² 'How the Just So Stories were Made', John Batchelor p164

³³ 'Axel Munthe', p238

³⁴ 'Cotswold Lad', p42

³⁵ 'Axel Munthe', p242

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."³⁶ In the autumn of 1928 Hilda and boys moved to Stockholm and the boys enrolled at the University.

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."³⁷ Axel was a master of simulated modesty!



Axel Munthe at Villa San Michele with his dog and pet monkey

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.³⁸

John Galsworthy wrote to Axel "that the book was an amazing record – quite inspiring in many ways."³⁹ 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..."⁴⁰ Nevertheless it was an international publishing sensation.

The near 40 year relationship between Axel and Queen Victoria ended on the 4th April 1930. She died in Rome with Axel at her bedside. Her last words to him were, "Come soon".⁴¹ 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 Victoria. As he wrote in *The Story of San Michele*, "The only people I really liked were those I felt sorry for."⁴²

³⁶ 'Axel Munthe', p254

³⁷ 'Axel Munthe', p265

³⁸ 'Axel Munthe', p267

³⁹ 'Axel Munthe', p270

⁴⁰ 'Axel Munthe', p288

⁴¹ 'Axel Munthe', p274

⁴² 'Axel Munthe', p278

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 January 1937 Axel was at the Villa on Capri when Herman Goering came to call. Axel gave him a 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."⁴³

During WW2 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 Victoria and 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."⁴⁴

In fact it was only a month later on the 11th February 1949 that Axel died. His funeral on the 17th 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."⁴⁵ 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 impossible to understand. He was as simple as a wayward child in spite of his very complete intelligence."⁴⁶

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.

⁴³ Axel Munthe', p323

⁴⁴ 'Axel Munthe', p349

⁴⁵ 'Axel Munthe', p290

⁴⁶ 'Axel Munthe', p353

At Much Marcle in Herefordshire, no more than an hours drive from Broadway, is the ancient manor house of 'Hellens'.



'Hellens'

In the early part of the 20th century *Hellens* was owned by Lady Helena Gleichen, Princess of Hohenhohe-Langenburg. She was a painter, her sister Lady Feodora was a sculptress and her married sister Lady Valda a musician.⁴⁷

Lady Helena met Axel Munthe in 1904 and it may well have been through her that Hilda Pennington-Mellor the cousin of her friend Eugenie, ex-Empress of France was introduced to Axel. "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."⁴⁸ This must be when Peter, Malcolm and their mother and father were living in Broadway, for the studio was over the south wing at *Hellens* in the loft. 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*.

⁴⁷ 'Hellens, the story of a Herefordshire Manor', Malcolm Munthe, 1991 p107

⁴⁸ 'Hellens, the story of a Herefordshire Manor', p109



Axel Munthe by Feodora or Helena Gleichen

Both the book in all its editions and Malcolm Munthe attribute it to Feodora. An inventory compiled from lists produced by the Courtauld Institute and Sotheby's 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."⁴⁹ 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 how his parents met and his childhood visits to *Hellens* and renders him as unreliable an historian as his father!

⁴⁹ 'Hellens, the story of a Herefordshire Manor', p116

Certain it is that Helena did not die until the first quarter of 1947, her death being registered in the District of Stroud in Gloucestershire.

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 from wounds suffered when fighting in Italy. He spent some of that time piecing together his imperfect recollections of his service during WW2. 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*". The summary that follows is taken from the May 2000 edition published by Baring and Rogerson Books.

In 1939 Malcolm was a Conservative party candidate for the forthcoming general election. When it appeared that war was inevitable he joined the Gordon Highlanders in July. By 1940 the War Department had discovered his knowledge of Scandinavia and that he could speak Swedish. He was promoted 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.

In 1941 he was appointed Military Attaché 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 5th 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 at 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."⁵⁰ 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*⁵¹ The negotiations foundered. Axel wanted too much money.

⁵⁰ [SOE and Mussolini's Italy | Imperial War Museums Blog \(iwm.org.uk\)](https://www.iwm.org.uk/blogs/2014/06/soe-and-mussolini-s-italy)

⁵¹ 'Axel Munthe', p306

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 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.



Malcolm Munthe. 'Grane' was his given name but rarely used

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.”⁵² 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.⁵³ 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 Princess [later Queen] Victoria of Sweden who, to an outsider, appears a pivotal and ever present figure in

⁵² [HISTORY \(southsidehouse.com\)](http://HISTORY(southsidehouse.com))

⁵³ [Man who stashed war weapons in Wimbledon Southside House was WWII spy Malcolm Munthe | Your Local Guardian](#)

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!”⁵⁴

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 Michel 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.⁵⁵ 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 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.”⁵⁶ Surely, Morris would have approved.

Christopher Hotten ©

August 2021

⁵⁴ ‘The Story of San Michele’ p292

⁵⁵ ‘The Story of San Michele’ p162

⁵⁶ ‘The Story of San Michele’ p313

Bibliography

The Road to San Michele, Bengt Jangfeldt, I B Tauris, 2016

Cotswold Lad, Sid Knight, Phoenix House, London, 1960

Hellens, The Story of a Herefordshire Manor, Malcolm Munthe, Pennington Mellor Charitable Trust, 1991

Sweet is War To Them That Know It Not, Malcolm Munthe, Baring and Rogerson Books, May 2000

The Story of San Michele, Axel Munthe, John Murray, London, 84th printing 1975

How The Just So Stories Were Made, John Bachelor, Yale University Press, 2021