

IV. Literary Figures and Actors (1930-1949)

1. [Percy Houston and V. Subrahmanya Iyer](#)
2. [Frederick Manchester](#)
3. [Gerald Heard](#)
4. [Aldous Huxley](#)
5. [Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood](#)
6. [Other Authors](#)
7. [Somerset Maugham and *The Razor's Edge*](#)
8. [Other Film Personalities](#)

1. Percy Houston and V. Subrahmanya Iyer

Swami Prabhavananda translated many of the spiritual classics of India for the purpose of making them understandable to the Western reader. Many of the existing translations at the time were philosophically obscure and very difficult to understand. He received assistance primarily from Percy Houston, Frederick Manchester, and Christopher Isherwood, just as



Vivekananda, Abhedananda, and other swamis had made contact with prominent people who had made names for themselves outside of the Vedanta Society. Their talents had seldom been used to produce literary, intellectual or artistic material in support of the Vedanta movement. A new trend commenced in the second half of the 1930s when Prabhavananda motivated distinguished writers to utilize their literary talents in the service of the Vedanta Society. His success as a translator and writer brought special and public attention to the Vedanta Society in Southern California.

Percy Hazen Houston (1882-1951), Professor of English at UCLA and then at Occidental College in Los Angeles since 1928, authored six standard textbooks. He co-edited historical works such as *Types of Great Literature* (1919), and he wrote *Main Currents of English Literature* (1926). He was the first President of the Vedanta Society when it was incorporated in 1934. At the farewell party for Swami Prabhavananda when he departed for India in August of 1935, Houston, then the Vice-President of the Vedanta Society of Los Angeles, had this to say about him:

May I say personally how very much the association with the Swami has meant to me? Not only have I profited by attending his lectures, but I have a close friendship with him which I hope will be permanent. I have come here week after week to enjoy lectures which sweep away the emotionalism which perhaps we have been used to in our churches, and strike at the root itself. Not only has the Swami clear perceptions of spiritual truth, but he has a fine mind. And not least of the pleasure I have had in hearing him is a delight in a beautifully developed piece of reasoning. I hope he will return to us full of added inspiration for our future benefit.¹

In January 1938, when Houston was a Professor at Occidental College in Los Angeles, Swami Prabhavananda spoke at the College twice, once in the chapel, and again before a class in religion. Houston served as an editor for *Voice of India* (later named *Vedanta and the West*) from October 1938 to September 1939, being succeeded by Gerald Heard. As Vice-President of the Society, he submitted the paper, "Vedanta in the United States" to the October 1939 edition of the publication. He served as the President of the Society in 1943 and probably for more years.²

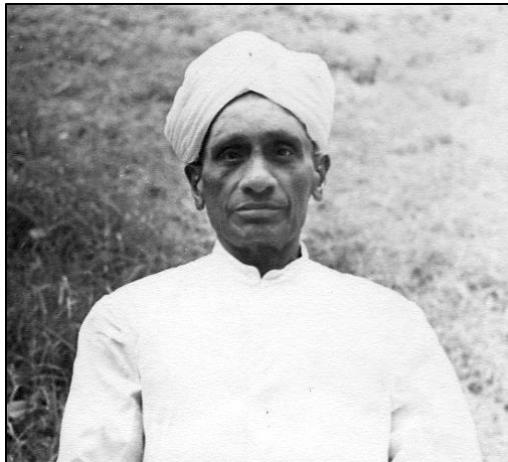
Swami Prabhavananda's *Vedic Religion and Philosophy* (1938) was written under Houston's editorial supervision. It contains sections on Indian philosophy in general, the Vedas, the philosophy of the *Upanishads*, and the message of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The philosophy department at Mysore University used the volume as a textbook. Sir P. S. Sivaswami Iyer, the former Vice-Chancellor of Madras University and Benares Hindu University, wrote:

I have gone through the book from cover to cover and I have nothing but unqualified praise for it. It is an admirably lucid presentation of the essential truths of Hinduism in a form easily intelligible to foreigners as well as Indians. It is

written in a beautiful charming style and will, I hope, attract a large body of readers. It will serve as an excellent textbook on Hindu religion to the students in our colleges.³

The *Prabuddha Bharata* (July 1938) remarked in a review of the book:

We are sure this extremely readable and lucid work will make a wide appeal to that growing body of intelligent interest in Indian philosophy and civilization, which is so much in evidence today. It is not always that we come across one so eminently qualified both by intellectual attainments and way of life to speak in clear and authoritative accents upon the elusive problems of Indian philosophy.



V. Subrahmanya Iyer

S. K. Maitra, head of the Department of Philosophy at Benares Hindu University, praised the book in the following words:

It is a wonderfully lucid exposition of the fundamental principles of Hindu religion and philosophy. It is a very valuable book not only for the Western reader but also for the Indian, for there are very few books which exhibit such a grasp of the essentials of Hindu religion and philosophy and such a power of exposition as this book does. It is a book which every college student and every serious foreign student of Indian religion and culture should read.⁴

Swami Prabhavananda expressed his gratitude to the late Percy Houston, "for editing a considerable portion of the original manuscript" of *The Spiritual Heritage of India*. Percy edited it in the 1930s, though it was not published until after his passing, in 1963.⁵

In his Preface to *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, Swami Prabhavananda cites V. Subrahmanya Iyer "for reading a large section ... and making valuable suggestions." Iyer went through the entire volume, except for the chapter on Sri Ramakrishna. He also contributed fourteen articles to the *Vedanta Kesari* and *Prabuddha Bharata* (1930-1944) and one to *Vedanta and the West* (1938). Iyer wrote in a letter addressed to the secretary of the Vedanta Society of Los Angeles in 1941:

It is a great fortune that you have, in your midst, one like Swami Prabhavanandaji than whom none is better qualified to guide seekers after the eternal Truth. I have not the least doubt that your institution will be the means of enlightening people in America, who by their intellectual and other endowments are best qualified to bring the greatest happiness to the world as a whole. I join myself with you in offering my humble prayer for the prosperity of your institution. May the Temple of the Vedanta Society be the means of bringing the blessings of the Lord and Sri Guru Maharaj within the reach of all Americans.⁶

Pundit V. Subrahmanya Iyer (1869-1949) was originally a Theosophist under the influence of Annie Besant, but after being inspired by the teachings of Swami Vivekananda and others, he switched his allegiance. He thereafter devoted his life to interpreting Shankara's philosophy from a Vedantic point of view, emphasizing reason and the scientific method. During the years 1937-1939, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Paul Brunton were Vedantic pupils of Iyer. Brunton wrote that Iyer "unfolded to me the higher wisdom of your land, expounded its most ancient books and explained its most imperishable philosophy. I was indeed fortunate to have the privilege of your instruction."⁷

2. Frederick Manchester

Frederick Alexander Manchester (1882-1974), Professor of English literature at the University of Wisconsin, taught by special appointment at Occidental College in Los Angeles. He served as co-editor of *Essays for College Men* (1913), *Composition for College Students* (1922), *Irving Babbitt, Man and Teacher* (1941), and other volumes. Manchester was a close friend of Swami Prabhavananda. He was interested in Indian philosophy, but he was not a member of the Vedanta Society. He worked as

Prabhavananda's first co-editor of the Voice of India (later named Vedanta and the West) and he composed a "Dedication Ode" to celebrate the consecration of the new Vedanta Temple on July 10, 1938. He was published once in the Prabuddha Bharata (1948), and he wrote a poem about Sister Lalita for Vedanta and the West (1938, 1948-1949).

Professor Manchester explained to Prabhavananda that a lecture is organized by establishing a solid foundation and building to a climax. Later, after some general suggestions on giving a lecture, Swami referenced Manchester's remark in a letter of August 20, 1969 to Swami Shantarupananda on the eve of the latter's sannyas:

In reply to your question about the things to cultivate for a good lecture, let me write down some points. First, you have to be absorbed in that thought. Then other people will be inspired. In other words, you have to feel in your heart about the subject on which you are going to speak. It is the heart that moves the audience, not the intellect merely.

Second, always remember that it is a part of your sadhana, worship. That is to say, don't feel any egotism. Never cherish the attitude, "I am lecturing." At the beginning of a lecture pray to Sri Sri Thakur and Mother, "O Mother, I speak as Thou makest me to speak. Make my words good and beneficial to all those who have come to hear." Look, we think that we will preach Sri Ramakrishna. But Sri Ramakrishna will preach Himself. You will see this for yourself.

The play of the intellect is very necessary indeed.... but let me tell you something which is important from the intellectual point of view. It is our bad habit that we often go in a circle and repeat ourselves.... An architect makes a plan of a building first. Then he begins to work. Similarly, first think seriously about the subject of your talk. Then note down point after point, and finally arrive at your conclusion. It should be a logical development of the subject. In other words, it should be a well-thought-out plan.

At another time, he said, "I never think I am going to give a lecture. I always pray to Holy Mother, 'Mother let me say words that will do good to these people.'"⁸

In the Preface to his selective translation and commentary of the Indian scripture, *The Wisdom of God (Srimad Bhagavatam)* (1943), Swami Prabhavananda points out, "In revising my translation for the press, I am happy to acknowledge, I have had the assistance of my friends Jane Manchester and Frederick Manchester." Swami wanted more Westerners to be familiar with this authoritative piece of devotional literature that Sri Ramakrishna enjoyed. The volume is comprised of stories about ancient Indian saints, seers, and philosopher-kings, including the life and teachings of Sri Krishna to his disciple Uddhava.

Concerning *The Wisdom of God*, Methodist Reverend Daniel A. Poling (1884-1968), editor of the interdenominational *Christian Herald*, enthusiastically wrote: "One of the supreme religious classics of the ages brilliantly translated. The author deserves and I am sure will have the gratitude of the English-speaking world." *The New York Times* (September 18, 1943) evaluated it as, "A compact and attractive little book of great value since it contains part summary and part translation of Indian scriptures, described by the contemporary Sri Ramakrishna as 'fried in the butter of knowledge and steeped in the honey of love.'" James Warnack of the *Los Angeles Times* concluded, "This fine scholar, capable teacher, and lovable soul, has given to the Occident not only a 'literary gem' but a great chain of spiritual jewels." Swami Yogeshananda described it as "cut and trimmed and tailored to his own specification and a calculated taste. It is a beautiful and spiritually inspiring work."⁹

Frederick Manchester worked with Swami Prabhavananda on the popular *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal* (1947), the principal text selected and translated from the original Sanskrit. The text contains a highly readable translation of twelve original and authentic Upanishads. In the preface to the translation Manchester writes:

Swami Prabhavananda brings to his interpretation of the Upanishads not only a scholarly acquaintance with the Sanskrit texts, but also the insight to be derived from close association with one who embodied in his own mind and spirit, in the highest degree, the great intellectual and spiritual tradition of India. He has been the disciple of the disciple of one who has come to be regarded in India as the latest in its list of authentic avatars.

Writing to Amazon.com, a nonprofessional appraiser made this enlightening statement about the Prabhavananda-Manchester translation of the Upanishads:

I already had another copy of the Upanishads and didn't really care for it. But this little book hit me with much greater force. It was so significant.... It's the translation that was the difference. It wasn't that I had suddenly matured and was now ready to hear this teaching because the other translation is still confusing to me. Not all translations are the same. What had been confusing to understand before, now became clear.... Now, I truly believe the Upanishads are one of the most significant teachings this world has ever known. This translation has no commentary. It is so clear you don't need a commentary.¹⁰

Swami Atmarupananda, writing for the *Prabuddha Bharata*, indicated that the book:

has also found great popularity in the West; and one need not look far for the reason. Though there is no dearth of scholarly translations of the Upanishads, there are very few which are readable. Swami Prabhavananda's translation, however, is not merely readable—it is a pleasure to read.... Again, every translation involves a certain amount of interpretation, and Swami Prabhavananda was pre-eminently fit by his vast knowledge and experience to give a reliable interpretation (*Prabuddha Bharata*, March 1980).

3. Gerald Heard



Gerald Heard

Reverend John Bickford Heard (1828-1908), an Anglican minister born in Dublin, Ireland, was the paternal grandfather of Gerald Heard. He wrote an important book entitled *The Tripartite Nature of Man* (1866) in which he defended the idea that humans are composed of body, soul [psyche] and spirit [pneuma], a concept held by early Greek language theologians such as Irenaeus, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, which is in contrast to the contemporary Christian idea taken from the Latin theologians that humans are composed of only body and soul.¹¹

Reverend Heard's grandson, Gerald Heard (1889-1971), born in London, worked for the Agricultural Co-op Movement in Ireland between 1919 and 1923 and in England from 1923 to 1927. From 1919 to 1923, he was employed as a live-in secretary to the agricultural expert and retired Irish statesman, Sir Horace Plunkett (1854-1932). Through Plunkett, Heard met George William Russell (1867-1935), who wrote prose and verse under the pen name of "A. E." Russell was an Irish patriot and a leading member of the Dublin Theosophical Society (1889-1998), which was guided by the writings of Madame Blavatsky. In 1897, Russell became the Assistant Secretary of Horace Plunkett's Irish Agricultural Organization Society, which was instrumental in improving the lot of the Irish farmers. He was editor of Plunkett's weekly periodical *The Irish Homestead* (1905-1923), and its successor *The Irish Statesman* (1923-1930), for which Heard wrote. Their goal was to improve the lives of Ireland's poverty-stricken farmers, by promoting cooperative societies of many kinds.

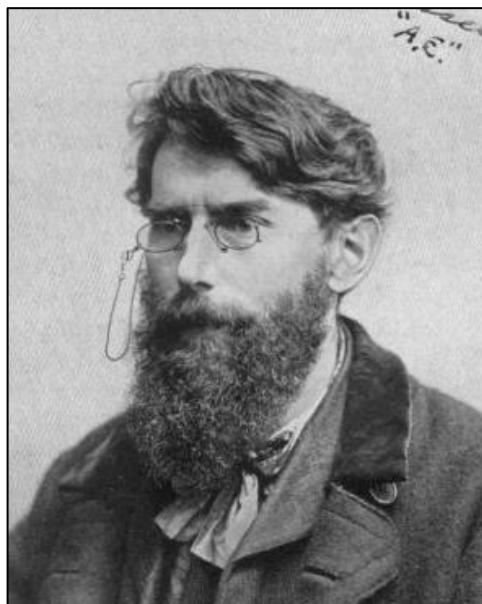
During 1917 and 1918, Plunkett and Russell worked together at the Irish Convention. Russell acknowledged that his writings were "written in a spiritual atmosphere generated by study of H.P.B. [Helena Blavatsky] and the sacred books of the East [Gita, Upanishads, Patanjali]." Russell was interested in Buddhism, reincarnation, and pantheism, and he wrote a novel titled *The Avatars* (1933) about the coming of a divine incarnation.

Gerald Heard also made the acquaintance of the 1923 Nobel Prize winning Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865-1939). It was Yeats who, in the late 1880s, introduced his lifelong literary friend George Russell to the Theosophical movement. Yeats came under the influence of Indian thought and the *Bhagavad Gita* from his very positive encounters with Mohini Chatterjee in 1885, and Rabindranath Tagore in 1910. In 1937, Shri Purohit Swami (1882-1941) and Yeats translated *The Ten Principal Upanishads*. Gerald Heard received a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* from George Bernard Shaw's wife sometime before January 1923 at Plunkett's house.¹² More recently, George Russell's *The Candle of Vision* 1918 and *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* were rated as two of the "100 Best Spiritual Books of the Twentieth Century" by a panel of experts convened by Philip Zaleski and HarperCollins publishers.¹³

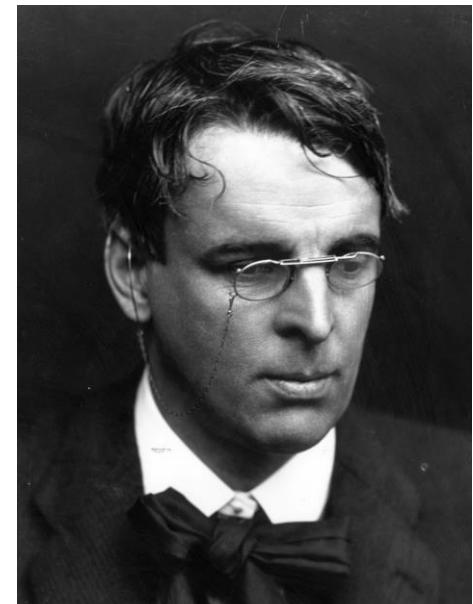
Heard lectured for the Oxford University Board of Extra-Mural Studies 1926-1929, and in 1929 he made the acquaintance of Aldous and his brother Julian Huxley. Soon after, between 1930 and 1934, he became a popular science commentator for the British Broadcasting Corporation. The famed English novelist and historian H. G. Wells (1866-1946) said, "Heard is the only man I ever listen to on the wireless. He makes human life come alive." Swami Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga* influenced Heard's *The Ascent of Humanity* (1929) and by 1935, in his *Source of Civilization*, he taught that mysticism could only be realized with the aid of yoga. By 1934, he taught yogic breathing exercises to Aldous Huxley to help him overcome vision problems.



Sir Horace Plunkett



George William Russell (AE)



William Butler Yeats

In April 1937 Heard emigrated to the U.S., accompanied by fellow pacifist Aldous Huxley, and Christopher Wood. Heard referenced Buddhism in his 1930 writings, and he referred to Hindu, Tantric, and yogic practices in the book *Pain, Sex and Time* (1939). He also made brief mention of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda in that volume. The book was recently reprinted. By the mid-1930s, Heard had read the *Bhagavad Gita* and works by S. Radhakrishnan, Sir John Woodroffe, Rabindranath Tagore, and other books of Eastern philosophy.¹⁴

Heard first met Swami Prabhavananda in 1939 at a social gathering. They drove home together, discussing Vedanta, and subsequently Heard received initiation and lessons in the practice of meditation. Isherwood observed:

Gerald had already started his own drastic program of self-preparation; every day he sat for three two-hour periods of meditation.... During these six hours he was engaged, as far as I could gather, in somehow fixing his thoughts upon what he called "this thing"—"this thing" being the source of inner peace which he was trying to contact. I think it was Gerald's natural fastidiousness which prevented him from calling it "God"—to say that he was looking for God would have sounded pretentious, ungentlemanly.

In a 1939 essay, "Is Mysticism Escapism?" Heard wrote:

If we want a more effective social order we must produce better men. How? By giving them that training whereby the innate egotism of the best of today is transcended, through what the mystics call the vision of God, through what we may call an accurate, or painstaking, gradual enlargement of consciousness.¹⁵

Gerald Heard's four major contributions to were: bringing prominent figures to the center, religious writings and editing expertise, donating the Trabuco property to the Society, and his public lecturing at the temple. One of his virtues was that in the early years of becoming a Vedantist, he was able to interest influential people in the religion. In 1939 he brought fellow Englishmen Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood to meet the swami. Isherwood explains Heard's influence on him this way:

Among the various areas of knowledge that Gerald was opening up to me was the history of mysticism. For the first time, I was learning that there had been thousands of men and women, in many different countries and cultures throughout recorded history, who had claimed to have experienced union with what is eternal within oneself.... Gerald impressed me enormously. Already I believed that *he*, at least, believed he was making some progress in contacting "this thing" inside himself.

In an April 8, 1941 letter to Swami Prabhavananda, Heard wrote, "I did however recommend a number of people to attend the Mission [Hollywood Vedanta Society]."

The association of influential authors like Isherwood, Huxley, Heard and John Van Druten gave a high profile to the Vedanta Society in Southern California in the 1940s and 1950s. It brought national and international attention to the organization. Heard wrote on spiritual matters in his correspondence with a wide assortment of prominent people, including professional fiction authors Ray Bradbury, John van Druten, Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, Somerset Maugham, Henry Miller, George B. Shaw, and Ivan Tors; nonfiction writers Joseph Campbell, Clare Booth Luce, Lewis Mumford, J. B. Rhine, Vincent Sheean, Huston Smith, Arthur Waley, Alan Watts, and Bill Wilson; musicians Dave Brubeck and Igor Stravinsky; and actors Ethel Barrymore and John Gielgud, among a host of others.¹⁶

During a lifetime of prolific writing, Heard authored thirty-eight books, both nonfiction and fiction, including several mysteries and supernatural fantasies under the pen name of H. F. Heard. With Swami Prabhavananda, he co-edited the Vedanta Society's *Voice of India* (renamed *Vedanta and the West*) from October 1939 to March 1941, and during 1951-1962 he served as one of the editorial advisors for the magazine. Over a twenty-year period, Gerald made thirty-one contributions to *Vedanta and the West* (1939-1958), twelve essays to the book *Vedanta and the Western World* (1945) and six to *Vedanta and Modern Man* (1951), and he contributed eleven articles to the *Prabuddha Bharata* and *Vedanta Kesari* (1945-1952).¹⁷ For Gerald Heard's crucial involvement in Trabuco College, see Chapter III, and for his lecturing at the center and his later life activities after 1950, see Chapter VI.

4. Aldous Huxley



Motivated by the encouragement of Gerald Heard, in 1939 Aldous Leonard Huxley (1894-1963) visited and joined the Vedanta Society. Huxley was a renowned and productive writer of both fiction and nonfiction – articles, essays, short stories, plays, poetry and films. During the 1940s he worked as a dedicated Vedantic writer. He produced a Foreword to Swami Nikhilananda's, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (1942), wherein he states:

"M." produced a book unique, so far as my knowledge goes, in the literature of hagiography. No other saint has had so able and indefatigable a Boswell. Never have the small events of a contemplative's daily life been described with such a wealth of intimate detail. Never have the casual and unstudied utterances of a great religious teacher been set down with so minute a fidelity.... [Sri Ramakrishna's life and conversations are] intensely mystical and therefore universal.... the most profound and subtle utterances about the nature of Ultimate Reality.¹⁸

In his Introduction to Prabhavananda and Isherwood's, *The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita* (1944) Huxley affirms:

An Incarnation of the Godhead and, to a lesser degree, any theocentric saint, sage or prophet is a human being who knows Who he is and can therefore effectively remind other human beings of what they have allowed themselves to forget: namely, that if they choose to become what potentially they already are, they too can be eternally united with the Divine Ground.

Huxley submitted a sizable thirty-one contributions to *Vedanta and the West* (1941-1948), thirteen to the *Vedanta Kesari* and *Prabuddha Bharata* (1941-1948), and sixteen essays to *Vedanta for the Western World* (1945).¹⁹

From his association with Swami Prabhavananda and the Vedanta Society, Aldous Huxley learned a great deal about mystical philosophy and theology. It was this training that provided him with the background knowledge he needed to formulate a universal theory of mysticism. According to a 1956 booklet on "Vedanta in Southern California" that appeared in *Vedanta and the West*, Huxley wrote *The Perennial Philosophy* while at Trabuco College, which later became the Ramakrishna Monastery. Professor Huston Smith, an old friend of Huxley and Heard, supports this idea, stating that:

Huxley had spent six months there [Trabuco College], dividing his time between meditating and writing *The Perennial Philosophy*. Vedanta (the philosophical expression of Hinduism as taught in America by monks of the Ramakrishna order) had sparked Heard's project [Trabuco College], for he and Huxley had found those monks to be the most serious and knowledgeable mystics around.²⁰

Heard's library at Trabuco provided a wealth of volumes on religious mysticism that Huxley could use to write his book.²¹ *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945) was judged to be one of the "100 Most Important Spiritual Books of the 20th Century" by a panel of writers for *Spirituality & Health* convened by Philip Zaleski and HarperCollins publishers.²² It provides short quotations, often only one paragraph, drawn from the writings of the great mystics and saints of the world, combined with Huxley's profound commentary. The list includes Indian sources like *Ashvaghosha*, *Bhagavad Gita*, Shankara, Sri Aurobindo, *Srimad Bhagavatam*, *Upanishads*, and the *Yoga Vasistha*. These insightful ideas are systematically organized into twenty-seven religious categories. Many excerpts from the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* and the teachings of the seer-philosopher Shankara are contained in the book. The volume served the purpose of drawing the attention of intellectuals and spiritual seekers to the message of Vedantic philosophy and mysticism.

In David King Dunaway's biography *Aldous Huxley Recollected* we read:

Huxley's studies with the Vedanta Society of Southern California had taken him into the realm of mysticism, and he was ever more serious about his meditations. Out of this hermitage and spiritual deepening came *The Perennial Philosophy*, an effort to combine in an anthology what Huxley perceived as the unifying substance of the world's religions: mysticism.

According to the *New York Times Book Review* (September 30, 1945):

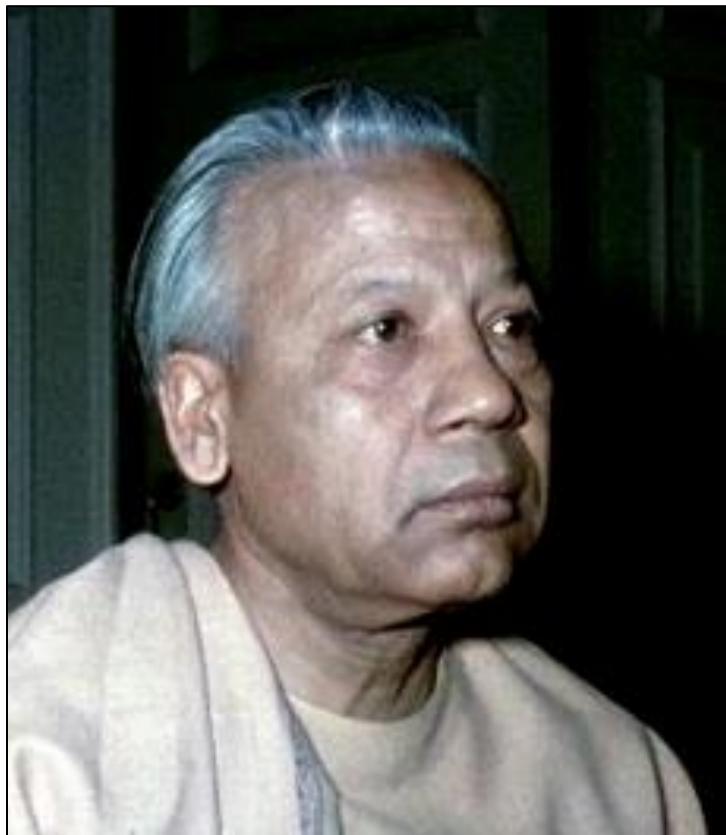
It is the masterpiece of all anthologies. As Mr. Huxley has proved before, he can find and frame rare beauty in literature.... Perhaps Mr. Huxley in *The Perennial Philosophy* has, at this time, written the most needed book in the world.

Quaker mystical philosopher Rufus M. Jones concluded:

I am amazed at the range of the author's knowledge.... It is both an anthology and an interpretation of the supreme mystics, East and West.... This is the first time that anybody has adequately covered the entire field and showed an equal familiarity with all fields. It is a magnificent achievement.²³

5. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood

The Cheshire, England born novelist, biographer, screenwriter, and playwright Christopher William Isherwood (1904-1986) spent four of his early years in Germany, from 1929 to 1933. There, he taught English and gathered the material for his most popular fictional works: three novels, the *Last of Mr. Norris* (1935), *Sally Bowles* (1937), and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), which were combined into the semi-autobiographical *The Berlin Stories* (1946).²⁴ Most of Isherwood's literary productions are, to a large extent, autobiographical. He is considered to be an insightful and entertaining observer of the human condition. He used the phrase "I am a camera" to indicate that he was a narrator, a simple recording device presenting the facts. With the utmost clarity, he had the unique ability to express exactly the nature of his observations.²⁵



Swami Prabhavananda



Christopher Isherwood

Gerald Heard introduced fellow English expatriate Isherwood to Swami Prabhavananda in the summer of 1939. Isherwood said he "was immediately aware of the atmosphere of calm in this room." The swami "talks gently and persuasively. His smile is extraordinary. It is somehow so touching, so open, so brilliant with joy that it makes me want to cry."

On August 4, 1939, Swami wrote out the following meditation instructions for him:

1. Try to feel the presence of an all-pervading Existence.
2. Send thoughts of peace and goodwill toward all beings—north, south, east and west.
3. Think of the body as a temple, containing the Reality.
4. Meditate on the Real Self. The Self in you is the Self in all beings. I am infinite Existence, infinite Knowledge, infinite Bliss.

On November 8, 1940 Isherwood received initiation. Soon afterward he had a vision of an orange-reddish light like firelight:

A face began to form. It was my own face. I looked at it, quite consciously, for several seconds before it disappeared.... the Swami was pleased and told me I'd seen my own "subtle body." He asked me if the face wasn't much handsomer than my own physical face. As a matter of fact it was: very distinguished, rather like a Red Indian, with light blue eyes.²⁶

In 1949 Isherwood expressed his appreciation for Swami Prabhavananda:

I have the most enormous respect for the Swami. He is the most remarkable person I ever met. He is absolutely honest and very intelligent—you very seldom find both together. He has a thing which one can only describe as a kind of spiritual power. My attraction to Vedanta came about largely through the fact that I came into contact with the Swami. I am a person who really never understands anything except through people.²⁷

In 1965, Isherwood recalled that Huxley and Heard:

both took a great liking to him and conceived a great respect for him, and in due course introduced me to him quite shortly after I arrived. Then I got more and more interested in what Prabhavananda had to teach. But in way far more than his teaching I was, as one would say nowadays, "existentially" interested in the fact that this man, who was obviously completely sane, very intelligent, and not in the least bit a crook, believed in the reality of mystical experience. By mystical experience I mean simply the possibility of contacting something other than one's self through a process of self-knowledge, through meditation or prayer, which of course is common to all religions. But I'd never met anybody who so completely convinced me that he believed in this possibility, that he had known people who had gone very far along that path, and that he himself had progressed quite a distance along it. This was what fascinated me about Prabhavananda, and we've remained close friends ever since. I see him constantly.²⁸

At the La Verne Conferences – the philosophical and meditation seminar that Gerald Heard had co-hosted in July of 1941 at La Verne Baptist College – a Quaker in attendance told Isherwood of a hostel in Pennsylvania. He traveled there during 1941-1942 and as a pacifist, aided Central European war refugees. But in 1943 he accepted an invitation to become a permanent resident at the VSSC. He could have moved to Trabuco College, but he moved instead into a small room in the Brahmananda Cottage at 1942 Ivar Ave. (now Vedanta Place). It was a Spanish-style stucco house with a tiled roof situated on a plot of land southwest of the temple. It had recently been purchased, in January of 1943.

A dedication ceremony was held on February 6, the birth anniversary of Swami Brahmananda, and it was on that day that Christopher Isherwood joined the household. There, he worked with Swami Prabhavananda on the translation of the Bhagavad Gita (1944), edited *Vedanta for Western Man* (1945), and he served as the Managing Editor of *Vedanta and the West* (February 1943-August 1945). He lived a semi-monastic life for two and a half years, but in August 1945 he decided to return to the outside world that he still longed for.

Swami and Isherwood had a very close relationship. It is said that when the family was having a discussion, Swami and Chris would start to laugh. No one else knew what they were laughing at, but it was so infectious that everyone joined in. Isherwood relates, "Once, fishing for a compliment, I asked Swami why he so seldom scolded me." His surprise reply was, "I don't scold the big faults." After that, Isherwood did not "question him further, either then or at any later time."

Isherwood's friend, the renowned two-time Pulitzer Prize winning writer Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), came to the monastery, joined one of the sessions of meditations, and attended some of Prabhavananda's lectures.²⁹

And some time during the 1930-1940s, William Faulkner (1897-1962), who won the 1950 Nobel Prize for literature, lived less than one block from the Hollywood Temple. He lived in an apartment that no longer exists, in an area that is now located on the freeway adjoining Vedanta Place. Living at the same location was William Tilden (1893-1953), possibly the greatest tennis player of the century, the singer-actress Jeanette MacDonald (1903-1965), and Academy Award winning writer-director Preston Sturges (1898-1959). It is not known if any of these people visited the VSSC.³⁰

Isherwood utilized his literary gifts to produce eight Vedanta books that can be arranged into three categories: three Indian religious scriptural translations; the editing of two collections of Vedantic articles and essays; and three original historical works covering Sri Ramakrishna and the VSSC. Though Isherwood knew very little Sanskrit, he acted as second author to Swami Prabhavananda on the English translations of *The Song of God: Bhagavad Gita* (1944), *Shankara's Crest Jewel*

of *Discrimination* (Viveka-Chudamani [1947]), and on the translation and commentary of *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* (1953).

Prior to teaming up with Isherwood, the swami already had a solid background in the use of the English language. He had delivered thousands of lectures in English and had engaged in multiple question and answer sessions over the prior twenty years. On his own, he had written books and numerous articles in at least three English language Indian journals and, working with English Professors Percy Houston and Frederick Manchester, both of Occidental College, Prabhavananda had learned more about the subtleties of the grammar, vocabulary, and syntax of the English language.

The Prabhavananda-Isherwood translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* had sold over a million copies by 1992. Isherwood's clear and lucid writing style made him an ideal working partner on the translation of Sanskrit literature. First Prabhavananda would translate the Sanskrit terms into English, and then Isherwood would render the words into his masterful prose. After nearly a year, Isherwood read the translation to Aldous Huxley and a woman friend. They were disappointed. In a flash, Isherwood decided to modify some of the prose into poetry, which resembled an Old English epic. This and some of their other translations were submitted to Sanskrit scholars in India. The *Gita* is not easy to translate, because the grammatical and sentence structure of the Sanskrit and English language differ. The Sanskrit language is composed of many precise philosophical and religious terms, based on a philosophical cosmology unfamiliar to Western thought. The Prabhavananda-Isherwood translation assumes a central theme throughout the *Gita*, while some Western scholars think the book is composed of numerous dissimilar elements assembled by many writers.³¹ Concerning the immensely popular rendering of the *Bhagavad Gita*, three reviewers stated:

To preserve the everlasting simplicity of the *Gita*'s words, Isherwood (who knows no Sanskrit) and his teacher have collaborated on this latest translation, designed to bring its message closer to "the ordinary, perplexed men and women of today." The result is a distinguished literary work (*Time Magazine*, February 12, 1945).

According to the *Prabuddha Bharata* (March 1946): This is a new and extremely welcome addition. The eternal message of the *Gita* has been rendered into simple language which is devoid of technicalities of dogma and doctrine and rises into suitable poetry where the sublimity of thought requires it. Swami Prabhavananda's name is a guarantee of the authoritative nature of the translation and its being faithful to the true spirit of the original.... We shall not be surprised, therefore, if this book supersedes as a *vade mecum* [manual] [compared to] all other books on the *Gita* in English.

The *New York Times Book Review* wrote: Democracy would have been impossible without the dissemination of knowledge and its continuance will be impossible without the dissemination of wisdom. For that reason alone this paperback edition of one of the most profound books ever written, often compared to the Sermon on the Mount, is a publishing event of major importance.... We are finding that we cannot hope to know Indians without knowing their ideals. Meanwhile, perhaps, a few of us, without political roles will be enjoying this classic for itself. It is presented in one of the outstanding translations of the day.³²

The *New York Times* review was penned by Gerald Sykes (1903-1984), who wrote influential literary reviews for a number of sophisticated periodicals. He established a reputation with his insightful novels and socio-philosophical writings.

Helen Rubel (Bhakti) wrote from the Belur Math near Kolkata, India to Swami Prabhavananda, "Your translation of the *Gita* is certainly a new departure. And indeed it ought to be brought from the idea of being ancient and difficult to read, to being understood as knowledge of vital importance for today." It was Bhakti who along with Anna Wooster in 1928 supplied the funds, enabling Swami Akhilananda to establish a Vedanta Center in Providence, Rhode Island. Later Bhakti gave Swami Akhilananda \$200,000 "to do exactly what he wished to do with it." In 1938, the funds were used to build the Ramakrishna Temple at the Belur Math.

Swami Prabhavananda gave a series of highly praised in-depth lectures on the *Bhagavad Gita* that are now available from Vedanta Press and Catalog.

One of Swami Prabhavananda's greatest efforts was to open the door of spirituality to all interested people. Many of the reviewers of his works stress their remarkable clarity. For example, concerning the *Bhagavad Gita*, one commentator writes:

There is no comparison between the ponderous cadences of the first [Edwin Arnold translation], and the clear lucidity of the second [Prabhavananda-Isherwood translation]. For example, the verse that Arnold translates as [BG, IX, 6]: "See! the shoreless airs, Move in the measureless space, but are not space, (And space where space without the moving airs); So all things are in Me, but are not I" appears in the Isherwood-Prabhavananda translation as: "For, as the vast air, wandering worldwide, Remains within the ether always, So these, my wandering creatures, Are always within me" (*New York Times*, November 11, 1956).

The Prabhavananda-Isherwood translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* was soon incorporated in a novel by the successful noted author Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945). Two of his novels became hit films: *Sister Carrie* (*Carrie*) and *An American Tragedy* (*A Place in the Sun*). His wife, Helen Richardson for some time had been interested in the doctrines of Hinduism and Buddhism, and had studied under Prabhavananda. She practiced breathing exercises found in a book on Hatha Yoga. It was probably through her influence that Dreiser read a number of books about Hinduism, and he consequently decided to conclude his long novel *The Stoic* (1947) with the heroine Berenice converting to Hinduism. According to many, after publication this section turned out to be the best part of the book. Vedantic ideas are expressed using Prabhavananda's translation of the Gita as a major source. Dreiser considered the poetic appeal of mysticism and the intense lyricism of the Gita far superior for his novel than any discursive philosophical discourse on Indian thought. He was inspired by the idea that the world is an expression of the divine and that one could intuit the divine in nature and in oneself. Shortly before his passing, Dreiser and Helen consulted with Swami Prabhavananda. The swami later mentioned, "It was she who did the talking. She wanted to know if they were right in their expression of the Vedanta teachings. I told them I could not tell this, unless I saw the manuscript itself. This they did not have with them. Mr. Dreiser said nothing at all."³³

The next Prabhavananda-Isherwood project was the classic Shankara's *Crest Jewel of Discrimination* (*Vivekachudamani*) (1947), which includes a long introduction to Shankara's life and teachings. It is a traditional text on the non-dualistic path to God, describing how spiritual wisdom can be achieved through self-discipline and discrimination between the real and unreal, i.e. the eternal and the transitory. A reviewer in the *Vedanta Kesari* (May 1948) states:

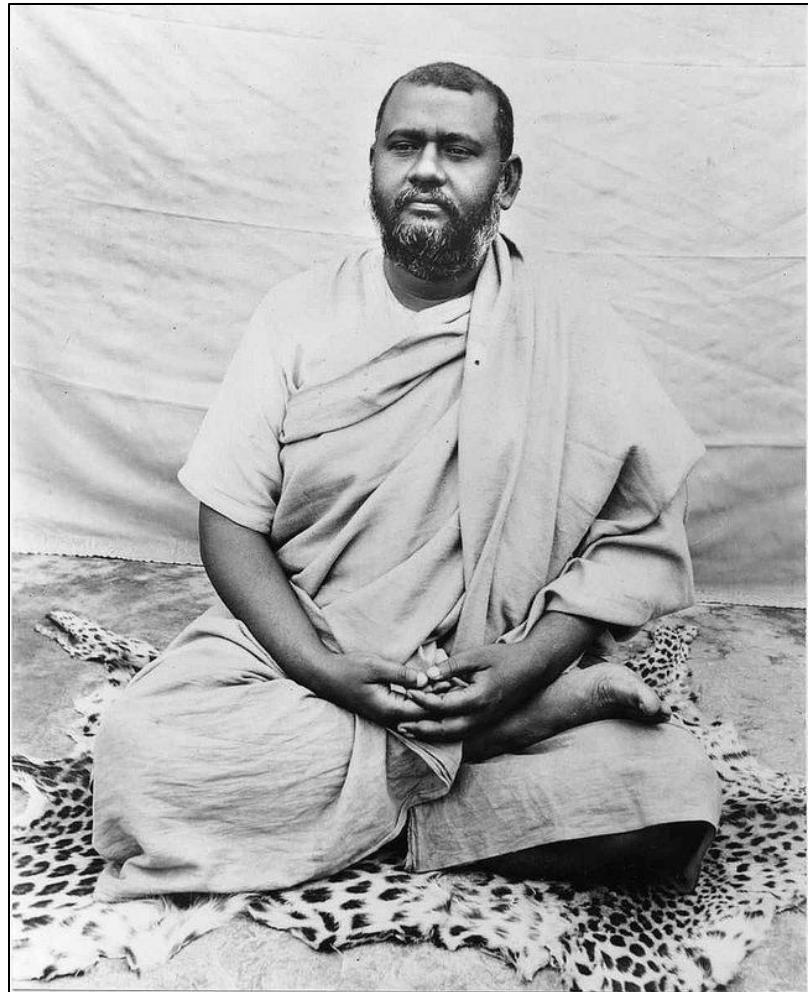
There are many translations of Sri Sankara's *Vivekachudamani*.... It can be said without hesitation that the book under review is the one best suited for western readers.... The translators who are profound students of Vedanta and who know the requirements of western students have enriched the Vedanta literature in the west by many translations of Vedantic classics. This edition contains a useful introduction by the translators, which gives a compendious and lucid account of Sri Sankara's philosophy and its implications for the modern man. We warmly commend this beautiful volume to all students of Vedantic thought.

During the 1940s Isherwood edited and wrote an Introduction to *Vedanta for the Western World* (1945), which is a collection of sixty-eight articles (fifteen by Swami Prabhavananda) produced by sixteen authors, drawn from the magazine *Vedanta and the West* (1938-1944). Though the subject matter of the volume varies widely, this group of essays by English, American, and Indian writers emphasizes the need for spiritual experimentation as a remedy for the sensual materialism of the age. The spiritual message of Vedanta is presented as a living tradition, a modern way of life grounded in inner religious experience rather than in theological dogmas. Some of the contributions are thought-provoking, while others provide practical directions for the spiritual aspirant. The collection of essays received glowing reviews, such as the following:

Vedanta is more than a philosophy, it is the elucidation of that philosophy and its exemplification in the lives of its great followers. It professes to offer a map and guidebook to the inner world.... The portion of good and informed writing is very high. The book lives up to its title. For the Western reader interested in the universal aspects of Indian thought from its highest to its simplest expression, this is a lively and well-balanced introduction (*New York Times Book Review*, April 14, 1946).

Some of the articles are highly thoughtful and thought-provoking, showing the fallacy of many modern thoughts in the clear light of penetrating reason, while others give practical directions to spiritual aspirants.... The book contains many ideas, which are both startling and ennobling. We have rarely come across such a collection of remarkable essays in one

volume. This book will be a source of inspiration to those who want to live a spiritual life and will give much food for thought to those who are skeptical about the utility of religion in man's life (*Prabuddha Bharata*, January 1947).



Swami Brahmananda

Independent of Isherwood, Swami Prabhavananda wrote the biography of his guru, *The Eternal Companion: Brahmananda: His Life and Teachings* (1944). The book delineates the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual son Swami Brahmananda (1863-1922), the first President of the Ramakrishna Order (1897-1922). Four excerpts:

All at once they saw a leopard coming toward them. Maharaj stood still. The leopard also stopped, about a hundred feet away, and looked at them for some moments. Then it turned and ran off. Neither of the devotees felt frightened. There could never be any fear in the presence of Maharaj [Swami Brahmananda] (p. 82).

"My play is over now. Look! The child Krishna is caressing me. He is calling me to come away with him! I am coming." The tenderness and heavenly compassion that filled his heart were expressed in every word he uttered. The whole atmosphere of the large hall where he was lying seemed to vibrate with this emotion. No one can describe the extraordinary sense of holiness which was created by his presence. Everyone knew that the fateful hour was approaching, and that Maharaj was taking his final leave (pp. 104-05).

"Dreams about enlightened souls, gods and goddesses, and divine incarnations, are real experiences. They are actual visitations. Many spiritual truths are revealed to

one in dreams. The effect and impression of such dreams remain. But one must not speak of them to anybody" (p. 238).

"Learn to see the good in others. If a man has some goodness, exaggerate his goodness in your mind. Give honor to all, praise all. Do this and sympathy for others will grow" (p. 271).

With insight, Sister Daya, the leader of the Ananda Ashrama in La Crescenta, wrote (*The Message of the East*, Winter 1944):

Occasionally there comes into the hands of the devotee a volume that conveys living light to the soul. Such is *The Eternal Companion*. It is the record of the life and teachings of the great Swami Brahmananda.... This is truly a precious collection, bringing into clear relief a very great and holy life. The teachings in the form of intimate conversations with disciples are of inestimable value to all sincerely struggling on the path.

According to the *Prabuddha Bharata* (March 1945):

In this book under review are presented the life and teachings of the gigantic spiritual personality.... The compiler of this volume, Swami Prabhavananda, has done invaluable service to the Western world by presenting in a concise and

systematic manner the life and teachings of this illumined soul.... This volume will prove an unfailing source of solace and guidance to all alike at all times and on all occasions. The biographical portion is excellently written, and the teachings are well translated.

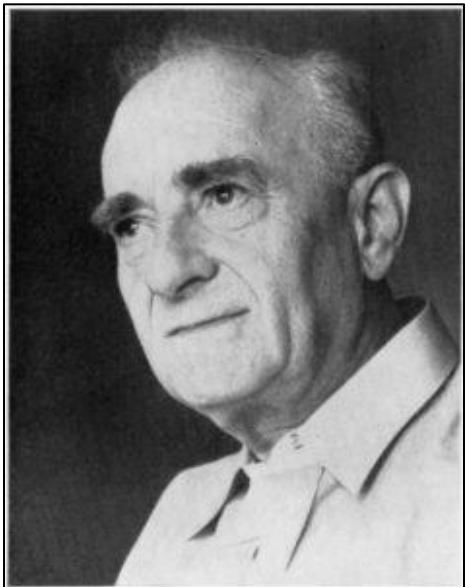
Swami Prabhavananda received another appreciative letter from Helen Rubel concerning *The Eternal Companion*:

You have put in so much direct speech and actual incidents, with the words that the heart and mind are struck directly and forcefully. It must have been fun to write it, and to relive the old memories which are so precious, and which probably mean more to you as every year passes. It has set fire to the memories of the Swamis here [at the Belur Math] to inspire them to tell a story, or describe a scene there from their own experiences. It is great fun; and it is also a very strong inspiration. Whether the reader already knows about your Master or not, when reading the book, still it seems as if the reading must produce a strong spiritualizing effect.³⁴

Swami Yogeshananda later said:

The book became a kind of second Bible for me, and surely it has been so for many others. In his presentation of the life and teachings of Maharaj, Swami has subtly, almost seductively, enticed the skeptic or agnostic to admire the portrait of contemplation and to entertain the possibility of relating oneself to God, the Person.³⁵

6. Other Authors



Paul Amann

In his published *Diary*, Isherwood mentions his friend Paul Amann whom he visited in Los Angeles during the years 1941-1942. Paul Amann (Amschelberg) (1884-1958) translated Romain Rolland's *The Life of Ramakrishna* (*Das Leben des Ramakrishna*, 1929), and the *Life of Swami Vivekananda* (*Der Gotter-Mensch Ramakrishna und Das Universale Evangelium des Vivekananda*, 1930) into the German language. He was an Austrian translator, novelist, and poet who in 1941 emigrated to the U.S. Paul Amann taught in Austria and at Mohawk College and Champlain College in New York State. His correspondence with Thomas Mann between 1915 and 1952 has been put into book form.³⁶

Franz Dispeker (d. 1955), a wealthy German Jewish banker from Berlin, emigrated with his wife from Switzerland to California. Isherwood found it "strange to find a Goya, a Van Dyck, a Rubens, and a Fabriano hanging on the walls of a furnished apartment in the midst of Hollywood." A personable and friendly person, Dispeker became a friend of Christopher Isherwood and the Vedanta family in 1943. He accompanied Swami Prabhavananda to Santa Barbara to buy the land that is now the convent parking lot, and he went to movies with Prabhavananda, Isherwood, and the monastics. They went to see *The Song of Bernadette* (1944) with Jennifer Jones, who came to see Swami fourteen years later. She had won the Academy Award for her performance as the French saint. Isherwood relates, "On the whole,

Swami approved of it. He liked the deathbed scene, and the vision of the Lady, because, he told us, visions usually appear in the corner of a room, and that's what happens here."

Franz Dispeker was a Trustee of the Board of the VSSC, and published twice in *Vedanta and the West* (1945), one article later appearing in *Vedanta for Modern Man* (1951). He participated in a lively group discussion with Prabhavananda and Aseshananda, Alan Watts, Huxley, and Isherwood on February 25, 1951. When Swami Prabhavananda visited Europe in 1953, he stayed with the Dispekers in Ascona, Switzerland, where he met and initiated Gerda Zinn (Ambika). In August of 1953, he and the Dispekers traveled together by automobile to many parts of Switzerland. Dispeker's daughter married Nico March, who became the Vedanta Society's stockbroker for about forty years, up to the late 1990s.³⁷

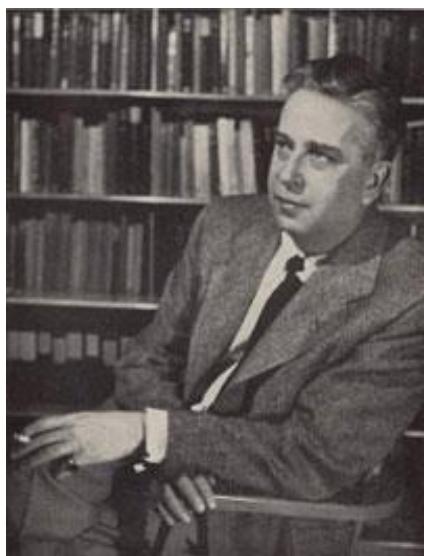
A serious Vedantist who wrote under the name Frank Dispeker, Franz translated the following books into German, and published them through Rascher Publishing Company in Zurich, Switzerland: Swami Prabhavananda's, *The Eternal*

Companion (1950) and *The Upanishads* (1951); and *Vedanta and the Western World* (with Anita Wiegand, 1949). He also translated into German Swami Vivekananda's *Jnana Yoga* (1949) and *Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga* (with Ilse Kramer, 1953); Swami Pavitrananda's *Common Sense About Yoga* (1952); and Swami Nikhilananda's *Prophet of New India: Abridged from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (1955). It is unfortunate such a prolific and talented writer as Dispeker, who often produced a volume a year, should have passed away during his prime in 1955. In May 1953 Prabhavananda worked with him on his upcoming translation of the *Gospel*.³⁸

Donald Hayne (1908-1979), a Catholic Priest ordained in 1933, became a Professor of Religion at the State University of Iowa, but decided to quit the priesthood because he was not comfortable teaching the dogmas of the church. After leaving the clergy, he came across Gerald Heard who told him about Vedanta. Heard introduced Hayne to Christopher Isherwood, who encouraged him to write the article, "Some Techniques of Western Monasticism" for two editions of *Vedanta and the West* (July-October 1943). He accepted Isherwood's invitation in April 1943 to live as a novice at the Vedanta monastic community in Hollywood. Hayne described Swami Prabhavananda as "a man of seasoned wisdom and authentic spirituality," and he practiced the techniques of meditation under the swami's guidance. Hayne tells us:

One afternoon, as I meditated in the temple, I did have the experience of a deep and vivid consciousness, of being one with all human beings. Although I did not lose my sense of individuality, it seemed to melt and merge into that of all others.... it was real enough to convince me that, however one explained them, the Vedantists' methods of meditation did produce results.

He once brought a Catholic mystic, Father Alexander Harvey, to meet the swami and, "they recognized each other immediately and were at one." Hayne left the monastery after two months, after which he lived to a large extent on loans from Christopher Isherwood. After some rough times during 1945-1959, he became Cecil B. DeMille's (1881-1959) executive assistant at Paramount Studios. He edited the *Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille* (1960), and he wrote his own autobiographical *Batter My Heart* (1963), which was quite popular. After DeMille's death Hayne was the technical advisor for the movie *The Cardinal* (1963) in which he played the role of Father Eberling.³⁹



John van Druten

English-born John van Druten (1901-1957) moved to the U.S. in 1926 and in 1939 met fellow pacifist Christopher Isherwood in New York City. He joined the Southern California Vedanta Society in the early 1940s and was an active member, particularly during the 1950s. During this period van Druten published three times in *Vedanta and the West* (1944-1945), and contributed three pieces to *Vedanta for the Western World* (1945). As a Broadway playwright, he is best remembered for *The Voice of the Turtle* (1943), a comedy that ran for 1557 performances, one of the longest-running non-musical plays in Broadway history. It became a popular motion picture starring Ronald Reagan (1948). Van Druten received an Academy Award for Best Screenplay for *Gaslight* (1944). His hit play *I Remember Mama* (1944) was thought by some to be one of the greatest family productions ever made. It was a successful motion picture and a long-running television series.⁴⁰

Sister Amiya Ella Corbin (1902-1986) who was born in England lived at the center for almost twenty years, from 1933 to 1952, first as a housekeeper and cook in Hollywood, and later as a nun. She held the position of Secretary of the Vedanta Society during those years and was on good terms with Isherwood. Amiya's works appeared ten times in *Vedanta and the West* (1942-1947) and she became the Managing Editor of the

magazine in 1949-1950. In addition, her literary productions appeared in *Prabuddha Bharata* and the *Vedanta Kesari*. We are indebted to Sister Amiya for preserving a portion of Southern California Vedanta Society history in, "Vedanta in Southern California," which appeared in *Vedanta and the West* (1951).⁴¹

In 1905 George Montagu, the ninth Earl of Sandwich (1874-1962), married Alberta Sturges (1877-1951), the daughter of Betty (Besse) Leggett (1852-1931) by her first marriage, who was then the wife of Francis Leggett. Alberta had known Vivekananda at Ridgely the Great Summer of 1899 when she was a vibrant twenty-two year old, and she was with him on his

trip in Rome, Italy and Paris. Swamiji liked her very much, wrote her a few letters, and mentioned her affectionately in other correspondence. Alberta was very drawn to him, even saying to her mother when George first proposed to her that she wondered if she would ever marry anyone, for she'd loved one man and that love was gone. But George, who was heartily approved of by Frank Leggett as a man highly regarded independently of his illustrious family connections and position won her over (*Late and Soon*, p. 184).

George Montagu, Alberta, and her mother Betty traveled to India in 1912. Much to his surprise and embarrassment, Swami Premananda embraced George at Belur Math. George touched the feet of Holy Mother and said he would "always remember the calm and somewhat detached expression of the eyes set in that noble countenance." Alberta had a "vast and intense experience with Sarada Devi." Alberta passed away in 1951 and George took refuge in the VSSC the following year. He planned on remaining for a few days, but ended up staying for two months. Instead, he returned to England with Amiya Corbin. They were married in December 1952, and she became the Countess of Sandwich. Pravrajika Prabhaprana relates:

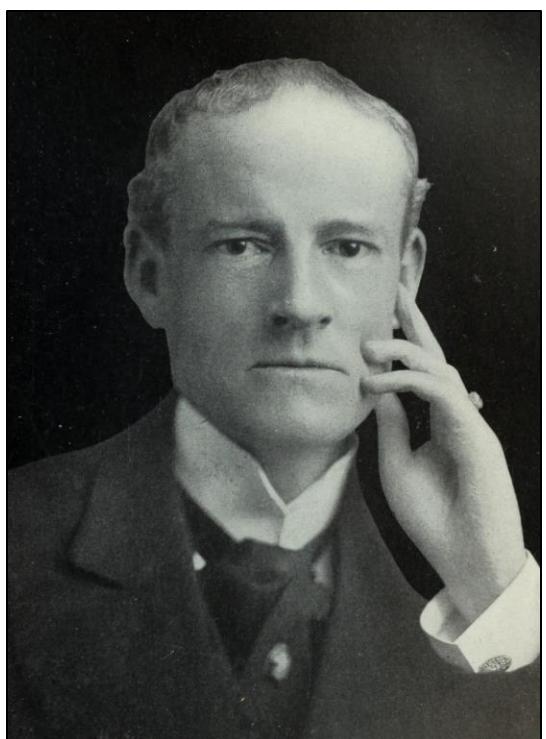
She came back quite often. And her whole life's thoughts were on this place. It was really very sad. That's what her family said: that she just relived her life while she was in England. She didn't think it was so wonderful while she was here, but when she was over there, she considered this heaven.⁴²

Sister Shivani (Mrs. Mary Hebard LePage), her husband Haridas (Thomas LePage) and Sister Bhavani (Elizabeth Ann Mayson) lived at Swami Abhedananda's Berkshire Retreat near West Cornwall, Connecticut up until 1916. Abhedananda came to Shivani's Los Angeles home more than once during his 1917-1921 visits to the Southland. By 1930 Sister Bhavani and the LePage's son Kalidas, had returned from living with Abhedananda for three years in his ashram in Darjeeling, India. They resided at the 279-acre Abhedananda Acres located about fifteen miles southeast of Palmdale. Abhedananda's "Hymn to Sri Ramakrishna" ("Vishvasya Dhata Purushastwamadyo") (*Prabuddha Bharata*, March 1932) and "Hymn to Sri Sarada Devi" ("Prakritim") (*Prabuddha Bharata*, March 1954) were originally written in Sanskrit, and then translated by the Swami into English. They were printed for the first time, by Kalidas LePage and his brother Lachan on a hand press at the Abhedananda Acres. His celebrated Sanskrit hymn "Prakritim" is sung at many Ramakrishna Centers throughout the world during the arati vesper service. It is a great tragedy that their home at Abhedananda Acres burned to the ground in 1943, and along with it thirty-five years of detailed records, as well as the first-third of her perspective biography on Abhedananda. This event forced Sister Shivani to write the biographical work *Swami Abhedananda in America* (1947), largely from memory and inspiration.

The biography gives an intimate and first hand account of Abhedananda's stay in the West by one of his most ardent disciples. Twice she mentions Swami Prabhavananda's living on Ivar Avenue (now Vedanta Place).⁴³

At Abhedananda Acres, Herschel Clifford Parker (1867-1944) visited Sister Shivani. Referring to Abhedananda he told her, "These Swamis have all of the virtues and none of the vices of other men." Parker a Professor of Physics at Columbia University and a heroic world-class mountain climber was Abhedananda's best friend in the West for many years, and in 1900 became the President of the New York Vedanta Society. He lived his later years in Los Angeles.⁴⁴

In 1964, Sister Shivani had some association with the Ananda Ashrama in La Crescenta. Jim Feeder a Vedanta devotee in the late 1970s met Kalidas LePage, who worked as a postmaster in the area around Abhedananda Acres. The road leading into the Acres is still called the LePage Ranch Road. Kalidas revealed that he had been initiated by Swami Abhedananda, and that, "The mantra can take you into the deep parts of the mind." He also mentioned that Kalidas had attended Swami Prabhavananda lectures.⁴⁵



Herschel Parker

7. Somerset Maugham and *The Razor's Edge*



W. Somerset Maugham

William Somerset Maugham (1874-1965), one of the most successful 20th century novelists in the English language, is noted for his clarity of style and skill as a storyteller. A prodigious writer, he authored such novels as *Of Human Bondage* (1915), *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919), and *The Razor's Edge* (1946). Maugham books sold over eighty million copies during his lifetime. To date (between 1915 and 2006), his novels, plays and short stories have been made into one hundred and eighteen movies, some of them for television.⁴⁶

In January 1938 Maugham visited the sage Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) at his ashram in Tiruvannamalai, India for a few hours. Maugham later described the events in a nonfictional essay entitled "The Saint" as a section of his book *Points of View* (1958). This brief contact inspired Maugham to use Maharshi as the model for the fictional Guru (Shri Ganesha) in his novel *The Razor's Edge* (1946). Maugham describes him this way:

He bore himself with naturalness and at the same time with dignity. His mien was cheerful smiling, polite; he did not give the impression of a scholar, but rather of a sweet-natured old peasant. He uttered a few words of cordial greeting and sat on the ground not far from the pallet on which I lay. After the first few minutes during which his eyes with a gentle benignity rested on my face, he ceased to look at me, but with a sidelong stare of peculiar fixity, gazed, as it were, over my shoulder. His body was absolutely still, but now and then one of his

feet tapped lightly on the earthen floor. He remained thus, motionless, for perhaps a quarter of an hour; and they told me later that he was concentrating in meditation upon me. Then he came to, if I may so put it, and again looked at me. He asked me if I wished to say anything to him, or ask any question. I was feeling weak and ill and said so; whereupon he smiled and said, "Silence is also conversation." He turned his head away slightly and resumed his concentrated meditation, again looking, as it were, over my shoulder. No one said a word; the other persons in the hut, standing by the door, kept their eyes riveted upon him. After another quarter of an hour, he got up bowed, smiled farewell, and slowly, leaning on his stick, followed by his disciples, he limped out of the hut. I do not know whether it was the consequence of the rest or of the Swami's meditation, but I certainly felt much better and in a little while I was well enough to go into the hall where he sat by day and slept at night.... They prostrated themselves once more and went to sit among the other devotees. The Swami entered that blissful state of meditation on the infinite which is called Samadhi. A little shiver seemed to pass through those present. The silence was intense and impressive. You felt that something strange was taking place that made you inclined to hold your breath. After a while I tiptoed out of the hall.⁴⁷

According to one source:

Although Gerald Heard has been considered the model for Larry Darrell in *The Razor's Edge* (1946), the character according to Maugham came from a composite of Heard, Isherwood, and Huxley.... Therefore, when he spent time with the three writers in Hollywood beginning in January 1941, he sought to explore their minds and their conversations for source material, already developing in his mind a major fictional character who would emerge three years later.⁴⁸

Swami Prabhavananda met Somerset Maugham around 1941 and saw him three times in the summer of 1945 while he was writing the screen version of *The Razor's Edge*. When he was working on the script, Maugham lived at the home of film director George Cukor for three months. Swami Vidyatmananda explains:

The first of the 1945 meetings took place on June 18 at the Player's Restaurant on the Sunset Strip, to which the author invited Prabhavananda for dinner. Chicken curry was on the menu, and the two decided to try this Indian dish. But Prabhavananda found the curry far from what it should be—a poor Western approximation. He proposed to Maugham that when they came together the next time Maugham should have dinner at the center, where he would be given chicken curry that was the real thing. The second meeting, consequently, occurred on Ivar Avenue [now Vedanta Place].

On June 29 Prabhavananda treated Maugham to a curry dinner at the Vedanta Society. They met again on July 6 at the residence of George Cukor. Isherwood, Katherine Hepburn, and Ethel Barrymore, a recent Academy Award winner for Best Supporting Actress, were also there. Isherwood relates that Swami was, "quite relaxed in their presence" and in a cheerful mood. The actresses responded to him by becoming "extraordinarily sincere, simple, and modest."⁴⁹

George Cukor (1899-1983), nominated five times for Best Director between 1932 and 1964, finally won the Academy Award for the musical *My Fair Lady* (1964).⁵⁰ Katharine Hepburn (1907-2003) was selected by The American Film Institute as the greatest American actress to begin her career before 1950. She garnered a record-breaking twelve Academy Award nominations for Best Actress and won the Oscar on an unprecedented record of four occasions during the years 1933-1981.⁵¹ Ethel Barrymore (1879-1959), whose father was born in Agra, India, was a friend of Gerald Heard and a member of the famous acting family, the sister of the famed actors, John and Lionel Barrymore, and the grandaunt of Drew Barrymore. As a young woman she turned down a marriage proposal from Winston Churchill and instead became a leading Broadway stage actress. In her later years she received four Academy nominations for her portrayals in supporting roles 1944-1949, winning the Oscar on one occasion in 1944.⁵²

Hollywood screened several highly successful movies about India. *Clive of India* (1935) starred Ronald Coleman, who at one time lived near the Hollywood Vedanta Society on Mound Street, as Lord Clive. *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935) was written by Major Francis Yeats-Brown, an admirer of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. There were also *The Rains Came* (1939), *Gunga Din* (1939), and *Jungle Book* (1942), starring Sabu. Incidentally, Sabu (1924-1963), the most popular Indian actor in the West, was born in Mysore, India, the son of a fourth generation elephant trainer (mahout). After being the lead actor in a series of successful English and American movies, he won several medals as an air force tail gunner in World War II, and due to a number of thriving real estate and other investments, he was among the richest stars in Hollywood until his untimely death. His friends included Hollywood actors James Stewart and the future U. S. President Ronald Reagan.⁵³

Maugham and Cukor sought technical advice from Swami Prabhavananda regarding what spiritual instructions Shri Ganesha (the fictional Ramana Maharshi) should impart to the hero Larry Darrell in his future film *The Razor's Edge* (1946). Swami Vidyatmananda informs us, "Prabhavananda offered two or three suggestions for additional scenes not in the book, to add authenticity and atmosphere. 'Ah, Swami,' murmured Maugham, 'you are going to make me work hard.'"

Unfortunately, Cukor did not direct the film and Maugham's script was not used. He was replaced by Lamar Trott (1900-1952), a screenwriter with great box-office appeal. Swami offered his services as a technical advisor free of charge to Trott, but he received no response. Maugham discussed Vedanta philosophy with Prabhavananda and said that he accepted Advaita Vedanta, but he considered himself too old to begin following spiritual practices. Chapter Six of *The Razor's Edge* and his essay in *Vedanta and the West* show that Maugham possessed some understanding of Indian religious philosophy. He was so impressed by Swami Vishwananda of the Chicago Center that he modeled a swami character in *The Razor's Edge* on him.⁵⁴

When Isherwood was staying with Maugham in July of 1956, Chris recommended that he send his essay on "Indian Philosophy" to Swami Prabhavananda for review. The essay was written, according to Maugham, as "a brief outline as may help the reader to understand the [Ramana] Maharshi's way of life. I have taken the works of Radhakrishnan as my chief authority." Swami Prabhavananda responded and, though Maugham did not accept all of his suggestions, the article was published in *Vedanta and the West* (January-February 1957). Maugham's essay covers fundamental Vedantic concepts such as

Brahman, Atman, Ishvara, maya, karma, reincarnation, and the subtle body. Isherwood stated, "Maugham replied gratefully and made the suggested alterations in his essay 'The Saint,'" which was published in the book *Points of View* (1958). When John Yale (later Swami Vidyatmananda) edited the volume *What Vedanta Means to Me* (1961), he remarked:

Looking back through this mass of personal testimony, I was surprised to find how many of the writers had volunteered the information that their interest in Vedanta had been first aroused through reading *The Razor's Edge*. The office workers at the Hollywood Center noticed a similar phenomenon. Many people who sent for information, or who came to pay a first inquiring visit, said that they had written or come as a result of having read the Maugham novel.

The Razor's Edge sold more than half a million copies in its first month of publication and introduced Westerners to basic Indian concepts like karma and reincarnation. Swami Nikhilananda once asked Maugham what he thought would be the best contribution that he, as a translator, could make to Western thought. Maugham replied, "Popularize Shankara in the West. We have our various religious philosophies—Aquinas, the dualistic ones and so on. We have no counterpart at all to Shankara." Nikhilananda responded with a translation of Shankara's *Atmabodha* (1946) and the *Drg-drsva Viveka* (1964).⁵⁵

In the movie *The Razor's Edge*, the director cast Tyrone Power (1914-1958) as the hero Larry Darrell and Clifton Webb as the worldly Elliott Templeton. Both Power and Webb came to visit Swami Prabhavananda at the Hollywood Vedanta Society. Tyrone Power described it:

[I] wanted to find out what kind of experience Larry had in India. The swami told us some fascinating things, such as the preparation and study and exercises which the student of Hindu philosophy must go through before he becomes an adept. Taking Larry as an example, I asked the swami what was the actual experience he had which changed him, and the swami said it was "an inner light." I guess that's what I have to get over.

Swami Vidyatmananda writes:

Standing with his back to the fireplace, talking to Swami, Power commenced to discuss his conception of how he planned to convey Maugham's hero. Prabhavananda responded in unconcealed disbelief: "And you think that you can play Larry!" Power sat down with a thump at this candid questioning of his ability to depict a man of illumination. But the two talked the matter over and as a result, Power studied the role and its religious implications with care, in an attempt to give as authentic a portrayal as he was capable of giving.⁵⁶

According to another report, Tyrone told the swami that he was capable of playing the role of any type person. In *The Rains Came* (1939) he played the Indian aristocrat Major Rama Safti who, after medical training in the U.S., sacrificed his life to help the poor people of Ranchipur. By 1943 Tyrone Power had become a top box-office attraction, having appeared in some twenty films, including *In Old Chicago* (1938), *Alexander's Ragtime Band* (1938), *Suez* (1938), and *Jesse James* (1939). During the Second World War, he volunteered as a Marine Corps pilot and, in 1945, flew several missions in the South Pacific. In 1946 he played the leading role in the screen adaptation of *The Razor's Edge*. Somerset Maugham described his acting as "perfect." The *Razor's Edge* received four Academy Award nominations, including that of Best Motion Picture. Power gave fine performances in other memorable films like *Captain From Castile* (1947) and *Witness for the Prosecution* (1958) before his untimely death.⁵⁷

8. Other Film Personalities

The actress Marion Davies (1897-1961) visited the Vedanta Society, probably accompanied by Aldous Huxley whom she met through the novelist Anita Loos. Marion Davies, a very charitable woman, starred in many silent and talkie films, and for about thirty years she lived with the newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst (1863-1951). Interestingly, Hearst's mother, the dynamic Phoebe Apperson Hearst (1842-1919), met Swami Vivekananda some time in 1894 in Washington, DC. Six years later she invited him to one of her Sunday musicals in the San Francisco area, but he did not attend. She offered him a thousand dollars to accomplish his work in India (CW, VIII: 495, 509).⁵⁸

When Christopher Isherwood lived at the Vedanta Society, on July 28, 1943, the Swedish-born film star Greta Garbo (1905-1990) made a celebrated visit to the center. Isherwood relates, "She played up to them outrageously, sighing how wonderful it must be to be a nun and implying that all her fame was dust and ashes in comparison." Swami Vidyatmananda tells us:

She was intrigued by Chris' entrance into monastic life and proposed to Swami Prabhavananda that she should come to live at the center too. "But our monastery is for men," Swami replied, agreeably amused by the great star, "and you are a girl." "Doesn't matter; I'll put on trousers," was her response. She played up to Swami: "Oh, how I love to look into those deep, dark, mysterious eyes." Swami was pleased. I have heard him recount this story dozens of times, always pronouncing what Garbo proposed to put on as "trowshers."⁵⁹

Garbo became one of Hollywood's legendary personalities. She combined extraordinary beauty, intelligence, and an independent spirit to become the reigning star of Hollywood in the 1930s. The New York Film Critics voted her as the actress of the year for her performances in *Anna Karenina* (1935) and *Camille* (1937). In 1950, a poll conducted by the prestigious theatrical newspaper *Variety* selected her as the best actress of the half-century.⁶⁰

In a newspaper article in 1949 Swami Prabhavananda mentioned:

I met Janet Gaynor and Margaret Lindsay. Beulah Bondi and King Vidor and his wife are real students and have been coming here for a long time. Mrs. Vidor is helping me devise some kind of dress for the sisters. She has arranged with the dressmaker Valentina in New York—do you know the name?—to come to see us on this matter.... "I live in Hollywood" he replied with a smile, "but I am not of Hollywood."⁶¹

Beulah Bondi (1888-1981), who played James Stewart's mother in four movies, received two Academy Award nominations. King Vidor (1894-1982) and his wife attended Swami's lectures and sought his personal advice, and in 1950 they brought Swami Aseshananda and Sister Amiya to Trabuco. Vidor was nominated five times for an Academy Award as Best Director between 1927 and 1956. He holds a Guinness World Record for "The Longest Career as a Film Director." It spanned sixty-seven years, 1913-1980.⁶²

[Return to TOC](#)

©2018 Gopal Stavig

[Next Chapter](#)

Photographs provided courtesy of the Ramakrishna Order of India, Advaita Ashrama, the Vedanta Society of Southern California, the Vedanta Society of Northern California, the Vedanta Society of St. Louis, the Vedanta Society of Portland, and others.

All rights remain the property of the owners.

IV. Literary Figures and Actors (1930-1949)

The word meanings for the abbreviations used in the endnotes can be found at the end of the eBook in the "[Bibliography Alphabetized by Abbreviation](#)" Section.

¹ PB (Nov. 1935), p. 571.

² Voice of India (Feb. 1938), p. 15; UCLC; Times (Nov. 11, 1951); Member's Letter (May 13, 1943), VSSC Archives; NYS.

³ Voice of India (Dec. 1944).

⁴ Voice of India (Dec. 1944).

⁵ Times (Jan. 16, 1938), p. C9; UCLC; *The Spiritual Heritage of India* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), p. vii; "Book Reviews," VSSC Archives.

⁶ VW (Sep-Oct. 1941), p. 32; Anandaprana, p. 114.

⁷ "Paul Brunton." Web: www.wisdomsgoldenrod.org/publications/cahn/PBThesisPti.doc; VK (Feb. 1950), pp. 476-78; UCLC; WARHD, pp. 925-26.

⁸ UCLC; Isherwood5, pp. 56-58; Varadapranai, p. 5; Varadapranai2, pp. 40, 102; Isherwood2, p. 355.

⁹ Yogeshananda, p. 102; RLA.

¹⁰ "Spotlight Reviews." Amazon.com. www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/087481040X/103-3703972-0511805?v=glance#product-details

¹¹ J. B. Heard, *Tripartite Nature of Man* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1882), pp. 37, 88, 98, 131-33, 210, 237; Falby, pp. 6, 9-10.

¹² CA (1978), II, pp. 246-47; (1997), CLIII, pp. 356-58; *Concise Dictionary of British Literary Biography* V (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991); David Izzo, *Christopher Isherwood Encyclopedia* (London: McFarland, 2005), pp. 72-73; R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), I, pp. 16-17, 48, 85, 469-70; II, pp. 384, 516-17, 536-38; Bruce Campbell, *A History of the Theosophy Movement* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 166-69; Alison Falby, "Henry Fitzgerald Heard," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), XXVI. Email from Alison Falby to Gopal Stavig (Nov. 11, 2005).

¹³ 100 Best Spiritual Books of the Twentieth Century. www.spiritualityhealth.com/spirit/node/60

¹⁴ Talk presented at the VSSC by John Roger Barrie on "Gerald Heard" (May 1, 2005); CA (1978), II, pp. 246-47; Alison Falby, "Cultural Exchange and Religious Change," *Canadian Journal of History* 39 (Aug. 2004), pp. 291-92; Falby, pp. 62-73; Web: www.geraldheard.com/index.htm

¹⁵ Isherwood4, pp. 11-13; Isherwood5, p. 32; www.geraldheard.com/index.htm; "The Swami and the Literati," *Script* (Feb. 1948), p. 19.

¹⁶ Isherwood4, pp. 12-14, 19-21; Vedanta, p. 39; "A Letter from Gerald Heard to Swami Prabhavananda" (April 8, 1941), VSSC Archives; David Izzo, *Christopher Isherwood Encyclopedia* (London: McFarland, 2005), p. 72.

¹⁷ www.geraldheard.com/index.htm

¹⁸ WARHD, p. 145

¹⁹ Varadapranai, pp. 5-6.

²⁰ Huston Smith, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), p. 6; WARHD, pp. 146-47.

²¹ VW (July-Aug. 1956), p. 49; "World of Religion," *Garden Grove Daily News* (July 29, 1956); Vedanta, p. 49; *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (2000), p. 182; WARHD, pp. 146-47.

²² Web: www.spiritualityhealth.com/spirit/node/60

²³ *Book Review Digest* (1945), p. 349; Vidyatmananda2; Catalog.

²⁴ CA (1992), New Rev. Ser., XXXV, p. 238.

²⁵ CA (1992), New Rev. Ser., XXXV, pp. 238-42.

²⁶ Isherwood4, pp. 23-24, 27-28, 72.

²⁷ NYS.

²⁸ Isherwood6, p. 34.

²⁹ Isherwood4, pp. 98-103, 164, 189; Lotus (Winter 1986); *Script* (Feb. 1948), p. 28; Isherwood6, p. 58.

³⁰ E. J. Fleming, *The Movieland Directory* (London: McFarland, 2004), p. 227.

³¹ Isherwood4, pp. 149-53; Isherwood6, pp. 35, 61; *Hinduism Today*. www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/1999/9/1999-9-12.shtml; Arthur Ryder (1877-1938) a Professor at the University of California in Berkeley, who was a friend of Swami Trigunatitananda and the Sanskrit teacher of J. Robert Oppenheimer, translated the entire *Bhagavad Gita* (1929) into poetry in which every verse rhymes.

³² *New York Times Book Review* (March 28, 1954).

³³ Marguerite Tjader, *Theodore Dreiser* (Norwalk, CT: Silvermine Publishers, 1965), pp. 230-32; Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1976), pp. 337, 372; Louis Zanine, *Mechanism and Mysticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 200-201; EWb.

³⁴ "A Letter from Helen Rubel to Swami Prabhavananda" (Dec. 5, 1944), VSSC Archives; *WARHD*, p. 915.

³⁵ Yogeshananda, p. 99.

³⁶ Isherwood2, pp. 189, 200, 207, 227; *Biographisches Handbuch der Deutschsprachigen Emigration Nach 1933* (München 1980-1983).

³⁷ Isherwood2, pp. 297, 331, 362, 566, 938; "A Disciple and His Guru," VSSC Archives.

³⁸ ELC; Diary (May 4, 1953).

³⁹ Donald Hayne, *Batter My Heart* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), pp. 199-201, 224-33, 305; Isherwood2, pp. 281, 289, 292, 298; UCLC.

⁴⁰ CA (1998), vol. 159, pp. 382-84, 387; *DAB* (1980), Sup. VI, p. 652.

⁴¹ Vidyatmananda6; Isherwood5, p. 453.

⁴² Vidyatmananda6; The Earl of Sandwich, "A Journey in India," *VW* (March-April, 1957), pp. 29-33; "A Letter from Besse MacLeod Leggett to her sister, Miss Josephine MacLeod," *VK* (May 1973), pp. 33-35; *Prabhaprana*, pp. 5-6; *Times* (Dec. 12, 1952), p. 34; Frances Leggett, *Late and Soon* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. xiii, 316-17.

⁴³ Shivani, pp. x-xii, xi-xii, 63, 66, 211-12, 217, 219-22; *PB* (Dec. 1966), p. 520; Swami Abhedananda, *Songs Divine* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1983), p. ix; Chetanananda (1997), p. 458;

⁴⁴ Shivani, pp. 106, 123-24, 219-20, 291, 295; *WWIA* (1930-31), p. 1720; *Directory* (1930, 1940).

⁴⁵ "A conversation with Pravrajika Vivekaprana of Hollywood," (2005); *Times* (Oct. 11, 1964), p. 117.

⁴⁶ CA (1993), XL, pp. 283-92.

⁴⁷ "Somerset Maugham and the Razor's Edge." Web: <http://davidgodman.org/rteach/smaugham.shtml>

⁴⁸ Samuel Royal, *A William Somerset Maugham Encyclopedia* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997), p. 86.

⁴⁹ Vidyatmananda2; Isherwood4, pp. 185-86; Isherwood1, pp. 38, 40.

⁵⁰ *EWB* (2000), XIX, pp. 82-84.

⁵¹ *EWB* (1998), VII, pp. 316-17; IMDB. "Katharine Hepburn."

⁵² *Films*, III, pp. 75-76; IMDB. "Ethel Barrymore."

⁵³ IMDB, "Sabu (I)."

⁵⁴ Vidyatmananda2; Isherwood4, pp. 185-86.

⁵⁵ Isherwood4, p. 217; Vidyatmananda2; "Letters from Somerset Maugham to Swami Prabhavananda" (July 7, 1956; Sept. 6, 1956), VSSC Archives; Yogeshananda, p. 257.

⁵⁶ Vidyatmananda2; "The Razor's Edge brings Tyrone Power Back," *Los Angeles Herald Tribune* (April 21, 1946).

⁵⁷ *DAB* (1980), Sup. VI, pp. 516-18.

⁵⁸ Arthur Christie, *The Asian Legacy and American Life* (New York: John Day, 1945), p. 191, *DAB*, Sup. VII, pp. 165-66; Burke, II, pp. 213-14; V, pp. 346, 381-82.

⁵⁹ Vidyatmananda2; Isherwood4, pp. 132, 134-35.

⁶⁰ *EWB* (1998), VI, pp. 205-07; *Scribner*, II, pp. 316-19.

⁶¹ NYS.

⁶² IMDB. "Beulah Bondi." "King Vidor." The Official Academy Awards Database. Web: <http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org>; Diary (Sept. 16, 1950).