

A black and white portrait of André Maurois, a man with a mustache, wearing a suit and tie, looking slightly to the right. The background is a blurred bookshelf.

□ André Maurois and the army

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Many French writers were combatants during the 20th century. Thierry Laurent details the eight years that André Maurois gave to the army. In his Memoirs, he is proud to have served this fine institution while being lucid about some of its dysfunctions and regretting its internal divisions.

André Maurois, pseudonym of Émile Salomon Herzog, born in 1885 in Elbeuf and died in Neuilly in 1967, author of some 90 books, elected to the Académie française in 1938, was for a long time one of the most widely read and respected writers of his generation, both in France and abroad (he was translated into several dozen languages). His notoriety as a storyteller, novelist, essayist, historian, biographer, journalist, lecturer and memorialist, led him to travel a lot (especially in Anglo-Saxon countries) and to become linked to the world. He made friends with great minds (such as Paul Valéry, André Gide and Rudyard Kipling) and some of the major political figures of the inter-war period (Aristide Briand, Winston Churchill, Edouard Herriot and Léon Blum). Nevertheless, today he is one of the countless authors of the first half of the 20th century who have been somewhat forgotten, the classicism of his prose and a certain conservatism in his ideals. He political and moral ideals undoubtedly aged his work in the sixties and seventies, a period in literature of great aesthetic and ideological questioning.

Francophile, the Alsatian Jewish family of Maurois left their native province when Germany annexed it in 1871. Judaism will remain only a cultural and domestic particularism among these partisans of assimilation by citizenship and ardent patriots. Hence their incomprehension and their sorrow when Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer from Alsace in the French army, was accused of imaginary treason and suffered opprobrium. The young Maurois will also long remember the anti-Semitic quolibets heard at school. The will to show everyone that a Jew sincerely loves his country and that he must even be exemplary in civics will incite him to absolutely do his military service when his health concerns and weak constitution could have allowed him to benefit from an exemption. Assigned to the 74th Infantry Regiment in Rouen, he would leave in 1905 with the rank of

sergeant. According to his memoirs⁹⁸: it was a beautiful time in his youth.

In 1914, leaving the family business where he had assumed important responsibilities, the infantryman Herzog, who was discovered to know English, became an interpreter and liaison officer with the British Expeditionary Force in France and then in Flanders. His efficiency in missions as well as his courage earned him the "Distinguished Conduct Medal", the military medal of the Empire. Inspired by this experience, he published *Les Silences du colonel Bramble*, published by Grasset in 1918 under the pseudonym André Maurois.⁹⁹ A novel as hilarious as it is serious: in the evening, after the fighting has stopped, the characters (a French interpreter and English officers) meet around a bottle of port and try to forget the uncertainty of the next day by talking about history or literature, philosophising about life and death. The immense success of the book will henceforth encourage its author to devote himself permanently to writing. He also reintroduced the character of Bramble in two other stories that were part of the meditation on war and peace: *Les Discours du docteur O'Grady* en 1922 and *Les Discours du docteur O'Grady* en 1922.¹⁰⁰ and *Dr. O'Grady's New Addresses* in 1950...¹⁰¹.

A well-known writer, Maurois is also a committed man who often speaks out about the future of his country and Europe, who is interested in defence issues and international relations : He was part of the editorial board of the *Croix de Feu* newspaper after 1918, justified the French presence in Morocco in 1925, was convinced of the correctness of the strategic theories of officer Charles de Gaulle during the thirties, opposed the sanctions against Italy after the war, and was a member of the editorial board of the French newspaper "*Croix de Feu*"'s invasion of Ethiopia, but denounces the cowardice of democracies in the face of Hitler ("that insatiable monster"), who advocated the "war on terror". The French-British rapprochement on the eve of 1939, published at the same time a long study on the origins of the inevitable war to come. A close friend and great admirer of Marshal Lyautey, he devoted a beautiful biography in 1931 to the man he nicknamed "France's first colonial soldier", which is still an authoritative work today.¹⁰². One of his favourite themes, which he often addresses in essays or fiction, is the question of authority and obedience to leaders. His conviction is that both the military and the civilian world need leaders who are virtuous and men of action. His 1924 *Dialogues on Command* on this subject should be read¹⁰³ : The book was controversial because some critics accused the author of a political inclination to support authoritarian regimes when he had been content to expose with understanding, and despite his aversion to tyranny as well as to anarchy and the excesses of individualism, the views of a defender of freedom and a defender of order. Maurois knew Lieutenant Aimery Blacque-Belair, a highly educated man, full of ardour for his work as a soldier, future parliamentarian and hero of the Second World War; the young officer became, without his knowledge, one of the interlocutors of the *Dialogues*; the other was the philosopher Alain, Maurois's former and revered teacher.¹⁰⁴.

In September 1939, when the general mobilisation did not concern the fifties, Maurois, who remained a reserve officer, wanted to return to uniform and make himself useful. The War Ministry first seconded him to the Information Commission, headed by Jean Giraudoux. Shortly afterwards, the very Anglophile Lieutenant Maurois - soon to be promoted to captain - was invited by the British army headquarters in France to be a "French official eye-witness" (têThis was an honorary function at first, but one that would enable him to chaperone war correspondents, report to his superiors on the state of the troops, and give lectures to soldiers. On a mission to London during the debacle of June 1940, he received a proposal from General de Gaulle the day after his call to become the spokesman for Free France. Fearing reprisals against his own people, who remained in France, and maintaining his confidence in Marshal Pétain, he declined the offer.

Demobilized, having previously received a mission order from the Foreign Affairs to join the United States and make the American elite aware of the French drama, he left in July, chose to stay there and did not return to France until 1946. In his many articles, he became the champion of French national unity, even if - and this will cause incomprehension among some - he remained measured in his criticism of the Vichy regime and somewhat distant from the Gaullists. But in collaborationist France, the name of the Jew Maurois will be devoted to gemonias and his books will be banned.

In January 1943, General Béthouart, who favoured the Allied landings in Morocco and Algeria, was sent by the Generals of the French army to the French colonies in the South of France. Giraud to Washington as head of the military mission in order to negotiate American aid, mainly the rearmament of the French army. Maurois meets him and tells him of his desire to leave for North Africa. He will again be liaison officer, operations reporter and communications officer, delighted to find, after so many misfortunes, an ardent and confident French army, but saddened by political cleavages, clan quarrels and even ego rivalries. From Algeria, he leaves for Italy and then Corsica, experiencing fatigue, illness and danger of death. In January 1944, on his return to the United States, he was in charge of information missions and criss-crossed the country.

In all, Maurois will have given more than eight years of his life to the army. In the assessment he draws from it in his Memoirs, he is proud to have served this fine institution while being lucid about some of its dysfunctions and regretting its internal divisions: "In this furious Europe of the 20th century, a country was worth what its army was worth, and no one could say that he understood France if he did not know the French army. I have, I believe, known it well and loved it deeply, although I was sensitive to its faults. She had beautiful traditions, coming from the Ancien Régime, the Empire and the colonial wars. It was, in France, one of the few institutions that would have crossed the bridge of the Revolution. Trained in scholarly schools, most of its officers reached a very honourable level of intelligence and culture. Many of them came to the army, as Lyautey later described to me, full of a mystical, almost religious faith. The fault was, in most troop corps, to give their enthusiasm little nourishment. An army that does not have a well-defined task falls asleep. In the colonies, the officers worked. At the War College, a few enthusiastic teachers awakened the best. But in the garrisons, routine led to indifference. Little effort was made to do better, to rejuvenate methods, to take into account scientific progress. Politics, especially after the Dreyfus affair, had penetrated and divided the army.¹⁰⁵ »

Many French writers were combatants during the 20th century. Some died at the front like Charles Péguy; others lost their illusions, came back bitter or lastingly pacifist, such as Céline or Jean Giono; someone like Joseph Kessel kept for a long time a kind of romanticism of war. As a testimony, Maurice Genevoix preferred to publish true stories; others, like a Roman Gary, resorted to fiction. In short, the experiences, the traumas, the lessons learned, the memories were obviously extremely diverse, as were the ways in which they were reported in literary terms. Maurois certainly never experienced life in the trenches, nor did he find himself on the front line of an offensive. He is, however, one of the few of our intellectuals to have participated in both major conflicts, to have courageously exposed himself, to have reflected on important issues such as the legitimacy of patriotism, the notion of just war, the relationship between soldiers and chiefs, the ties between army and nation. His background is as respectable as it is original and interesting.

98 Paris, Flammarion, 1970, final edition, chapter 5.

Pensées mili-terre

Centre de doctrine et d'enseignement du commandement

99 Paris, Grasset, 1918.

100 Paris, Grasset, 1922.

101 Paris, Grasset, 1950.

102 Paris, Plon, 1931.

103 Paris, Grasset, 1924. In the re-edition of 1949 - which does not include the "Dernier dialogue sur le commandement", published in Mes songes que voici en 1933. A long preface allows Maurois to explain the misunderstanding of 1924 and to qualify certain opinions.

104 The historian and army colonel Cyril Becker has just published an interesting essay entitled L'art de commander selon André Maurois, with a preface by General Hervé Wattecamps and an afterword by General François Labuze (Paris, Editions Nuvis, 2017).

105 Memoirs, op. cit. pp. 62-63.

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