Somerset Maugham’s first visit to Japan in 1917 was made under very special circumstances. Travelling undercover as a writer and journalist, he was in fact on a highly secret mission for the British government that, had it been successful, might have changed the course of twentieth-century history. He was bound for Russia, in turmoil following the revolution in March and the abdication of Czar Nicholas II. The socialist Alexander Kerensky headed a provisional government facing increasingly intractable problems ranging from the ongoing war with Germany and severe food shortages to the threat of the Bolsheviks, bolstered by the return that spring of Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin. Maugham’s mission was to support the Kerensky government and help prevent a Bolshevik takeover, thus keeping Russia in the war against Germany.
The safest route into Russia being via Japan, in late August 1917 Maugham arrived in Yokohama on a Japanese boat from San Francisco. With the situation in Russia increasingly desperate, he had no time for sightseeing or gathering material for stories, but ten years later he sketched the journey in his autobiographical short story ‘Mr Harrington’s Washing’, where his secret agent alter ego William Ashenden arrives in Yokohama only to hear that in Russia ‘the soldiers, completely out of hand, would rob him of everything he possessed and turn him out onto the steppe to shift for himself. It was a cheerful prospect’.1 Undaunted, Maugham made his way via Tokyo to the port of Tsuruga (Tsuruki in the Ashenden story), from where he sailed across the Japan Sea to Vladivostok, where he took the Trans-Siberian Railway to Petrograd. Ten weeks later, carrying an urgent message from Kerensky to Lloyd George requesting aid, he would leave Russia via Finland two days before the October Revolution brought the Bolsheviks to power and with it, had he still been in the country, his execution as an imperialist špion.2

Despite the fact that it was the first Asian country he had ever visited, Japan did not make a deep impression on Maugham, nothing like his first experiences of the Pacific islands or South East Asia, both of which inspired a torrent of fiction and non-fiction writings. His long-distance travels had begun a few months before his Russian adventure, with his 1916–17 journey to Hawaii, Samoa and Tahiti, on which he drew for the stories later collected in *The Trembling of a Leaf* (1921). After the Great War, he resumed his travels in 1919–20, including a four-month journey in China, which resulted in the travel book *On a Chinese Screen* (1922) and the novel *The Painted Veil* (1925). It was towards the end of this journey, in April 1920, that he made his second visit to Japan. He planned to return to England via Suez and so the most direct route would have been to sail home from Hong Kong, but instead he chose to travel to Mukden and thence to Japan. He may also have visited Japan, primarily to catch boats, on his journeys to Hawaii, Australia, Malaya and Borneo in 1921 or Burma, Siam and Indochina in 1922–23. During these journeys he visited Kobe, Kyoto, Yokohama and Tokyo, but almost forty years later he remembered nothing but strolling in the park across the street from the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo and seeing ‘some good-looking people, some awful policemen’.3

**JAPAN IN MAUGHAM’S FICTION**

Reading through Maugham’s novels, short stories, travel writings and other writings, one finds very little indeed on Japan.4 The fragmentary journal Maugham kept from 1892 to 1944, published as *A Writer’s