

The New Criterion

Features March 2013

The pen is mightier

by David Pryce-Jones

David Pryce-Jones explores the novels of Evelyn Waugh and his special relationship with the author.

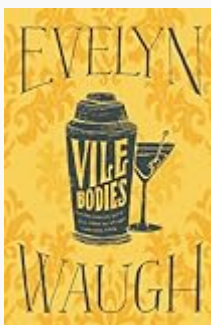
BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Evelyn Waugh

Decline and Fall

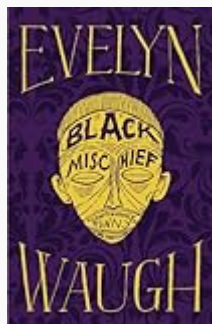
Little, Brown and Company, 320 pages, \$29.99



Evelyn Waugh

Vile Bodies

Little, Brown and Company, 304 pages, \$29.99



Evelyn Waugh

Black Mischief

Little, Brown and Company, 304 pages, \$29.99



Evelyn Waugh

A Handful of Dust

Back Bay Books, 304 pages, \$15.99



Evelyn Waugh

Scoop

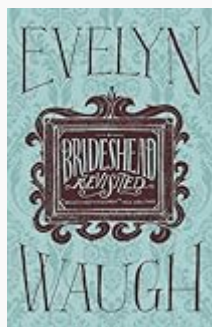
Little, Brown and Company, 288 pages, \$29.99



Evelyn Waugh

Put Out More Flags

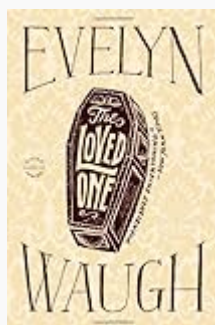
Little, Brown and Company, 304 pages, \$29.99



Evelyn Waugh

Brideshead Revisited

Little, Brown and Company, 416 pages, \$30.00



Evelyn Waugh

The Loved One

Back Bay Books, 176 pages, \$16.00



Evelyn Waugh

Helena

Little, Brown and Company, 240 pages, \$29.99



Evelyn Waugh

Men At Arms (Sword of Honor)

Little, Brown and Company, 320 pages, \$29.99



Evelyn Waugh

Officers and Gentlemen (Sword of Honor Trilogy)

Little, Brown and Company, 336 pages, \$29.99



Evelyn Waugh

The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold

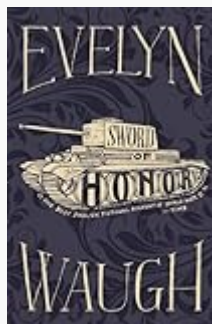
Little, Brown and Company, 208 pages, \$29.99



Evelyn Waugh

Unconditional Surrender

Little, Brown and Company, 320 pages, \$29.99



Evelyn Waugh

Sword of Honor

Little, Brown and Company, 784 pages, \$50.00

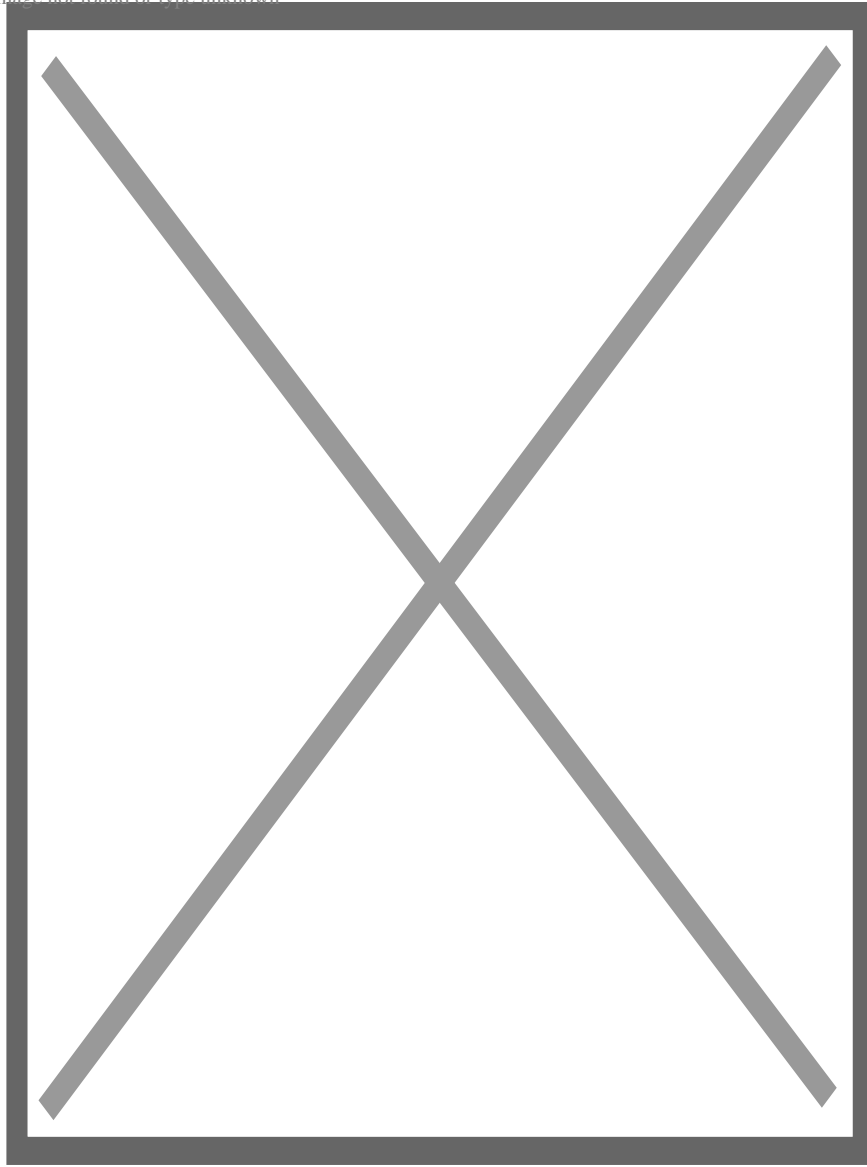


Evelyn Waugh

The Complete Stories

Little, Brown and Company, 544 pages, \$35.00

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Portrait of Evelyn Waugh from December 1940

Evelyn Waugh was one of those characters that English literature throws up now and again, who put a special stamp on the times, like Dean Swift or Dr. Johnson. About the best that most writers can expect from posterity is cultural embalming, probably in the form of a monograph written by some academic paid to read books nobody else is reading. Almost fifty years after his death, Waugh remains a presence because the spirit of comedy in his books is pure and irrepressible. A reissue of his fiction by Little, Brown and Company attests to the lasting nature of his works.¹ Indeed, Captain Grimes, the Emperor Seth of Azania, Basil Seal, Mr. Todd, William Boot, Mr. Joyboy and Aimée Thanatogenos, and Apthorpe command their place in the British psyche along with Mr. Pickwick and Jeeves.

Literature, for those who embarked on writing careers in the 1920s, was often more a means to enter society than a genuine vocation. A white tie and a tailcoat were as much tools of the trade as a typewriter. So equipped, the talented young with ideas for a masterpiece in their heads were able

to meet the right people in the right houses. Waugh fitted naturally into this coterie, and he was to immortalize the particular house of Madresfield as Brideshead, and its owner Lord Beauchamp as Lord Marchmain. Waugh explored all the possible uses to which the private joke can be put in fiction and in life. The private joke and the hope to write a great novel were similar defining characteristics of Cyril Connolly, a close contemporary, born within a few weeks of Waugh in the autumn of 1903. His review of *Decline and Fall* in the *New Statesman* reads as though he wished he had written this novel. The Waugh–Connolly relationship was unsettling and competitive because each wanted the good opinion of the other and was determined to have it. Friendly or otherwise, it was Waugh's private joke to attach the name of Connolly to comic characters. A sub-plot in *Sword of Honour* turns on a contraption called Connolly's Chemical Closet. *The Loved One* was Waugh's private joke about America, and Connolly devoted a whole issue of *Horizon*, the magazine he edited, to it.

The ways of the world of course put Waugh to the test. He steered clear of the Spanish Civil War, did not visit Berlin or Moscow, converted to Catholicism through the Jesuits, and did not care whom he mocked, writing sentences like "As that great Negro Karl Marx has so nobly written . . ." and "Women of Tomorrow Demand an Empty Cradle." My father, Alan Pryce-Jones, had almost certainly stayed at Madresfield and put on his white tie and tails for the same occasions as Waugh. He, too, aspired to write a great novel, and meanwhile invited Waugh to contribute to *Little Innocents*, an anthology of childhood reminiscences that he edited in 1932. Ten years later, in the review that Alan wrote of *Put Out More Flags*, he spoke for quite a number of readers when he wondered, "Doesn't Mr. Waugh overdo it a little?" Waugh then referred to "the man Jones," until Alan converted to Catholicism and was rewarded with an inscribed copy of *Helena*.

Waugh was not going to be told what to think and what to do, and he seized on people who should have known better than to let their opinions make fools of them. Attaching the nicknames Parsnip and Pimpernel to an easily identifiable W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, he put them down because they had been professional anti-fascists who had run away to the United States the moment there was real fighting to be done. His friend Henry Green was ridiculed because war work for him involved joining "a group of experimental novelists in firemen's uniform" who were to be seen squirting a little jet of water into a burning London club. Closely modeled on Lady Diana Cooper, one of the famous beauties of the period, Mrs. Stitch is a forceful character who makes and breaks careers whimsically. Readers in the know could enjoy these private jokes and the accompanying quarrels and gossip; everyone else had to make of it what they could.

The publication in 1945 of *Brideshead Revisited* was a turning point for Waugh. The book sold half a million copies in the United States and gave him independence. Ironically, the evocation of a past that was truly over and done with allowed Waugh to live as though it were still present. Successful Englishmen have kept alive a time-honored ideal of living in a handsome country house amid books and pictures of their choice, and Waugh could realize it. The novel's subject, its aura of

nostalgia, was open to misrepresentation. Sure enough, Edmund Wilson wrote a long review in *The New Yorker* that branded Waugh as a hopeless reactionary. During a prolonged stay in the Soviet Union, Wilson had picked up tips on how to wage the class war. The snobbery associated with the fictional Lord Marchmain and his family in *Brideshead*, Wilson wrote more in anger than sorrow, was “shameless and rampant.” The book was mere romantic fantasy, a Catholic tract. Edmund Wilson seems not to have noticed that Anthony Blanche, the flamboyant character who deals in reality, finds the entire Marchmain family “sinister.” The individual distress of each of them becomes a collective failure. The great houses of the family are sold or degraded. The plot could almost be summarized as a warning against the abuse of privilege that aristocrats are prone to. Those who might replace them are Rex Mottram and his Conservative friends, but Waugh reduces them to figures of farce. Their cross-talk about Hitler on the eve of the World War runs for a couple of pages that seem lifted from one of his earlier comedies. “The communists will tear him limb from limb”; “He’ll scupper himself”; “He’d do it now if it wasn’t for Chamberlain”; and so on.

A minor character in *Brideshead Revisited* is made to stand for the Common Man. Hooper is a shallow youth with a flat Midland accent who says “rightyoh,” and observes the universe in a “general, enveloping fog.” The worst of it is that Hooper is no romantic. Knowing nothing about past heroes and victories, he cannot possibly understand why England is a country worth fighting for. The older Waugh got, the more he detected a Hooper in everyone, and the greater the disappointment that he couldn’t help giving vent to. “I am by nature a bully and a scold,” he said of himself. Gilbert Pinfold, his fictional alter ego, is “bulging with wrath that was half-facetious, and with half-simulated incredulity . . . he was absurd to many but to some rather formidable.” Pinfold’s distress arose just like Waugh’s, from “plastics, Picasso, sunbathing and jazz—everything in fact that had happened in his own lifetime.” Christopher Sykes was a close friend and admirer of Waugh. In the biography that Sykes wrote, he considers that Waugh, rejecting so much that was going on around him, ought to be described as an anarchist, even a revolutionary, and in a wonderful understatement muses, “He was never much influenced by the common desire to be liked.”

By the time I came to know Waugh, I was at Oxford. Intellectual activity in the university was restricted to discussing which elements of Left-wing doctrine would bring about utopia. Indoctrination had replaced education. Waugh’s eldest daughter, Teresa, was also an Oxford undergraduate, and she arranged for a dozen of her more passable contemporaries to lunch with her father in the Randolph Hotel. I imagine that Waugh felt as cautious about us as we felt about him. During the meal there was a lot of embarrassed silence until the subject of homosexuals fathering children cropped up. Then Waugh boomed across the crowded dining room, “Lord Beauchamp had six, Oscar had two, and even little Loulou Harcourt managed one.” Later that term, Teresa invited me for the weekend to Combe Florey. After a three-hour drive, we reached the house. A window on the second floor opened with a rattle, and Waugh leaned out shouting, “Go away!” When he’s like that, Teresa said, we had better go—and so we drove back the three hours to Oxford. For a party to celebrate Teresa’s marriage, he engaged a military brass band that played music like the Post Horn Gallop to which it was impossible to dance. As midnight struck, Waugh

stepped into the center of the room, clapped his hands, and said at the top of his voice, "It's over." About that same time, I was invited to the wedding reception in the House of Lords of Waugh's eldest son, Auberon, always known as Bron. Waugh was standing by himself in an inner courtyard, a compact overweight figure with a tailcoat and top hat. Fury and the wish to be elsewhere were visible in his features. "My name's Waugh, Evelyn Waugh, father of the bridegroom," he said. "Who are you?" I explained that we had met before, and he started back: "I used to know your poor dear father" (who still had another forty years to live).

Earlier, during military service in Cyprus, Bron accidentally shot and nearly killed himself. Visiting him in hospital, his father said, "It is a soldier's duty to die for his country." A journalist in his turn, Bron adopted his father's playacting in every respect as though he had no emotional independence of his own. I came to miss his regular portrayals of me as a Welsh dwarf who stole rolls of wire from the tips in the valleys and had somehow escaped from the coalmines. His father's exaggeration was under better control. *Face to Face*, for instance, was a television program with a huge audience. Its star interviewer was John Freeman, a member of the socialist elite. He was determined to make a fool of Waugh, and Waugh knew it. During his appearance, he wore one of his favorite black-and-white checkered suits with a flower in the buttonhole, and added to the posture of defiance by smoking a cigar while denigrating the modern world, and television in particular. "Since you object so much to television," Freeman asked, finally falling into the trap, "why do you appear on it?" Releasing another vast puff of cigar smoke, Waugh went for the kill: "For the same reason as you, Mr. Freeman, for the money."

I have to confess that my Oxford brainwashing persisted for some time. *Mea maxima culpa*—in my essay about the revised edition of *Brideshead Revisited*, I called Waugh "a social Philistine" and repeated clichés that Edmund Wilson had popularized. A number of prominent Lefties congratulated me. Waugh sent a mutual friend to tell me that he felt hurt that the boy Jones could do such a thing, but he was generous enough to let it go at that. Soon afterwards I became literary editor of *The Spectator* and asked him to review a novel by Muriel Spark. He answered, "I like to write for *The Spectator* when there is some writer who seems to be getting too little or too much praise, or when there is an expensive book on Victorian painting or architecture which I want for my library. I don't do routine reviewing any more." When he did contribute, his copy was handwritten without a single erasure.

The final edited version of *Sword of Honour* is a personal statement large and grand enough to have a universal dimension. A fictionalized version of Waugh himself, Guy Crouchback, its hero, discovers his responsibilities to other people and to God. The name Crouchback derives from the cross that Crusaders once had stitched on their tunics. Volunteering for military service as war is declared, Guy stops at the tomb of one such knight, an exemplary predecessor: "Sir Roger, pray for me, and for our endangered kingdom." The Hitler–Stalin Pact at the end of August 1939 inspires love of country, sacrifice, and honor, and Waugh gives Guy a noble expression of this spirit. "The enemy at last was plain in view, huge and hateful, all disguise cast off. It was the

Modern Age in arms. Whatever the outcome there was a place for him in that battle.”

When he enrolled, Waugh was already thirty-six, and so was Guy—old enough to be known by his fellow officers as “uncle.” Waugh attributes to Guy his own complete experience of the war. Both trained as commandos, both were fearless. Parachute jumps provided a thrill akin to mysticism. Like Waugh, Guy was present at the fall of Crete, and English literature has nothing comparable to the first-hand description of that disastrous battle. Both saw service in Egypt and then with the British Military Mission in Yugoslavia. In a private joke that he did not pass on to Guy, Waugh maintained that Marshal Tito was a woman.

The assumption underlying Guy’s frame of mind is that England has the moral strength and the armed might to win the war on its own. This is a delusion. In reality, the political and military conduct of the war is all too often incompetent or just plain wrong. Furthermore, the alliance of Britain with the Soviet Union makes nonsense of Guy’s prayer over Sir Roger’s tomb. A brother officer tells Guy that the more men there are to shoot at Germans the better, but this truth does little to console him. As things go wrong, Winston Churchill comes to sound “painfully boastful” while Tito, by comparison, appears a highly skilled politician who can run rings round an old boy who knows nothing except parliamentary politics. Modeled on a famously dashing soldier whom Waugh knew and admired, the character of Ivor Claire seems to Guy to be “quintessential England, the man Hitler had not taken into account.” Disappointingly, however, he abandons the men under his command in Crete to be taken prisoner and shamefully saves himself. Not helping matters, a fool of a general “helped drive numerous Canadians to their death at Dieppe,” while another loses his life stupidly in the belief he’s “biffing” Germans. Corporal-Major Ludovic is the most ambiguous figure Waugh ever conceived. He shoots the cowardly Major Hound in Crete but saves Guy’s life. Home again, he writes aphorisms that a fashionable editor given the name Everard Spruce publishes in a monthly called *Survival*. (I happened to be present when someone asked Cyril Connolly what he thought about being caricatured as Spruce, whereupon he pulled out of his pocket a letter from Waugh that he was carrying around like a laissez-passer.

Passionately refuting any such identification, the letter was a rite of passage in this relationship, and of course a lie.) As if cowards were not bad enough, intelligence agents and a homosexual diplomat are traitors engaged in a Communist conspiracy. A few years later, Philby, Burgess, and Maclean proved that what had seemed another unlikely private joke had been reportage.

“Quantitative judgments don’t apply,” is the guidance Guy receives from his father and repeats to himself. Waugh lets it be understood that in the sight of God it is enough to save one’s own soul; the collectivity is beside the point. Guy is redeemed by an act of charity and forgiveness towards the wife who ran away and had a child in a meaningless affair with an unsuitable man. He accuses himself of feeling an “indefinable numbness” where others are concerned, but in Yugoslavia he finds himself in a position to help defenseless Jews: “He was Moses leading a people out of captivity.” One of the Jewish women trying to flee puts an end to the crusade against the Modern Age. “It seems to me there was a will to war, a death wish everywhere. Even good men thought

their private honour would be satisfied by war," she says. "God forgive me, I was one of them," is Guy's reply.

D"o you think things will ever be normal again?" one of the other minor characters asks at the end of *Sword of Honour*. What has been lost is beyond recovery. George Orwell was a very different character, but his *1984* is also a vehicle of regret and elegy; both writers speak like nobody else to a country in decline. Airstrip One is fate. A glass paperweight carries a charge powerful enough to evoke England as it was when normal. By coincidence, Orwell was born in the summer of 1903 within weeks of Waugh and Connolly; the latter thought him a revolutionary in love with the past. Wounded in Spain, Orwell was unable to fight the war against the hateful Modern Age in arms, but nonetheless he too was a Crusader. In the blitzkrieg of 1940, he hoped the British army in France would be cut to pieces rather than surrender. Waugh wrote to Orwell that he admired *1984* and thought conditions by then might well be as described. The book had failed to make his flesh creep, he went on, because through the Church some would still save their souls. This reputedly uncharitable man asked if Orwell would welcome a visit from him and some friends. And on his deathbed, the reputedly socialist and secular Orwell jotted down notes for an article on Waugh that he never had time to write. One of these final notes concludes that Waugh is about as good a novelist as one can be while holding his opinions.

I saw Waugh one last time, at a wedding in a small Catholic chapel in the country. He and Christopher Sykes came in together and sat side by side near the front. Corresponding to a recent Vatican decree, the service was in English, not Latin. Waugh waved his ear trumpet, that brilliantly symbolic prop, and he interrupted loudly and often: "What's going on?" and "Can't understand a word." A few weeks later, he died.

1 Fifteen books by Evelyn Waugh were reissued by Little, Brown and Company on December 11, 2012: *Decline and Fall* (1928), *Vile Bodies* (1930), *Black Mischief* (1932), *A Handful of Dust* (1934), *Scoop* (1938), *Put Out More Flags* (1942), *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), *The Loved One* (1948), *Helena* (1950), *Men at Arms* (1952), *Officers and Gentlemen* (1955), *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957), *Unconditional Surrender* (1961), *Sword of Honor* (1965), and *The Complete Stories* (1999).

David Pryce-Jones is the author, most recently, of *Openings & Outings: An Anthology* (Criterion Books).

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