

EVELYN WAUGH

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At the end of his novella *Scott-King's Modern Europe*, Evelyn Waugh's hero remarks, "I think it would be very wicked indeed to do anything to fit a boy for the modern world." This was in 1946 when Waugh's career as a novelist was not quite two decades old and when he had exactly twenty years more of life.

Once it was fashionable to dismiss Waugh as a curmudgeon who dearly loved a lord and could not or would not adjust to the realities of socialist Britain. He did say he found it possible to go on living in his native land only by imagining he was a tourist. In this negative attitude toward the way we live now, Waugh seems merely to have beat the rush, but as always with this deep and subtle man there is so much more than conservative grumbling about confiscatory taxation to finance the welfare state. Waugh was a tourist here in the way every Catholic is -- he was *in via*.

His early novels are disarming. In a style midway between that of Ronald Firbank and P. G. Wodehouse, Waugh wrote of bright young things, heedless, mindless aesthetes who careened about London in what seemed a prelapsarian fashion. The early novels are autobiographical, the

author relates to them somewhat as F. Scott Fitzgerald related to his first two novels and innumerable short stories in which the Jazz Age is featured. The Jazz Age, like Waugh's *Metroland*, turns out to be a world of despair, where winter dreams die and we can be shown fear in a handful of dust.

An argument could be made that *Handful of Dust* is Waugh's greatest novel. For the first time, it became unmistakable that he was an extremely serious writer who needed the comic to make his vision of life bearable. Tony Last -- the last of a line, one who sticks to his last, a survivor into a strange time -- is the one moral man in a world of insouciant betrayals. In the end, all the other characters ends up well, but Tony is last seen in a Latin American jungle, the prisoner of an illiterate madman to whom he must read the works of Dickens over and over and over. The juxtaposition of the sentimentalized Christianity of Dickens and the jungle clearing is eloquent.

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Waugh was a convert who took his new faith with the utmost seriousness. It is altogether typical of him that, in the preface to *Helena*, he countered the quip that if all the pieces of the true cross were put together the result would be an enormity by citing the calculations of Charles Rohault de Fleury to show we have a mere fraction of the cross's presumed size. "As far as volume goes, therefore, there is no strain on the credulity of the faithful." He wrote lives of Edmund Campion the martyr and of Ronald Knox. Like most Englishman, he had a snooty attitude toward the United States, manifest in *The Loved One*, for example, but there was one great exception.

In 1946, in a long article for *Life*, Waugh predicted an American epoch in the Catholic Church. Like Jacques Maritain, he was impressed by the phenomenal rise in contemplative vocations after the war; Waugh himself edited the English version of Thomas Merton's autobiography. At about this same time, he predicted that Monsignor Knox's translation of the Bible would be the standard version for ages to come. Prophecy was not among Waugh's gifts. Vatican II came as a great shock to him, not so much the Council as its implementation.

"I am now old but I was young when I was received into the Church... One of the extraneous attractions of the Church which most drew me was the spectacle of the priest and his server at low Mass, stumping up to the altar without a glance to discover how many or how few he had in

his congregation; a craftsman and his apprentice; a man with a job which he alone was qualified to do. That is the Mass I have grown to know and love. By all means let the rowdy have their `dialogues', but let us who value silence not be completely forgotten."

When Donat Gallagher collected the essays, articles and reviews of Evelyn Waugh, he appended a list of the writings he did not include. There are a dozen articles which appeared in the *Tablet*, the *Catholic Herald* and *Commonweal* during and immediately after Vatican II which if collected would be an important contribution to the history of the post-conciliar Church.

Waugh was a writer of consummate skill. He came to deplore the fruity excesses he had permitted himself in *Brideshead*. In everything else, his mature style is a model of clarity, simplicity and brilliance. We have his novels, his travel books, his biographies, his journalism, his diaries and his letters. He was a very productive writer who earned his living with his pen. Like the priest, he had a job to do and no other Catholic writer of the 20th century did it any better than Evelyn Waugh. He died at the age of 63 on Easter Sunday, 1966. Finally Waugh and peace had met.

HANDFULS OF DUST

Yet another life of Evelyn Waugh has appeared, this one by Selina Hastings, a friend of the author who puts before herself the twofold task of

giving her reader an impression of what it was like to know Waugh and what it was like to be Waugh. Piers Paul Read, in reviewing the book in the London Times (October 27, 1994), says she has accomplished the first but only God could do the second.

The very fact that this is the third major biography of the curmudgeonly Catholic convert suggests how elusive the life of another can be, even the life of a somewhat public figure. Waugh left a huge diary, which has been published, and many letters of which several collections have appeared. By all accounts Waugh could be rude, he suffered fools not at all, and he was given to self-indulgence in matters of food and drink. But what strikes me in reading his letters is his generosity -- he seemed forever to be giving someone money or help of one kind or another, unobtrusively. And he was merciless with himself. Biographers can tell us unfavorable stories about him because he told them first.

Waugh, when asked by someone how he could be act the way he did and claim to be a Catholic replied that his critic might consider how much worse he would be if he weren't a Catholic.

Because Waugh himself is the source of much of what we know about him, we must be careful in interpreting the information. Writers are notoriously unreliable as witnesses of autobiographical fact. It is not that they lie, but something of imaginative shaping enters into their accounts of themselves.

It doesn't matter. The essential life of others is closed to us. Indeed, we are mysteries to ourselves. Sir James Barrie said that life is a book in which we set out to write one story and end by writing another. Novels are books deliberately written in quest of the wonder of the human person whose life is inevitably a mixture of the intended and unintended but with the suggestion of a pattern of whose meaning we are never quite sure. For most of us, it is this realization that makes us aware of the hand of God in our lives. The poet, the novelist, the saint above all, remind us how little our fate is in our hands.

If nothing else, turbulence at thirty thousand feet can bring it forcibly home. Or reading a little Waugh.