Acquaintances: Morrice James (in 1941) and the young Evelyn Waugh

This article, or memoir, was written by my father Morrice James (Lord St Brides) in 1985, four years before his death. As I continue with my long-term project of editing and annotating his writings — for the family, friends and myself, and eventually for publication — as his 'literary executor', I come across one gem after another. In this one, he describes his wartime association with one of England's most celebrated 20th-century writers. The figures in brackets refer to endnotes.

I've kept the title of Morrice's article, but an alternative might be 'A Study in Snobbery'. Evelyn Waugh (1903–66) was a fine writer, but a famously flawed human being, and George Orwell identified his two 'driving forces' as 'snobbery' and 'Catholicism'. Perhaps (as Christopher Hitchens suggests in The Atlantic Monthly, May 2003; see http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2003/05/hitchens.htm) Waugh wrote as brilliantly as he did for the very reason that he thoroughly despised and disapproved of the modern world.

Clare James

A Late Leaf of Laurel for Evelyn Waugh

> *It was with this battalion that I first realised the quality of the new troops and officers they have trained during the last year. With the exception of the commander of the machine gun company, there was no officer who would have been worth making a corporal.* (1)

Captain Evelyn Waugh, our new Adjutant, and I walked off the parade ground together. The men continued with weapons instruction under their non-commissioned officers. This was on Hayling Island, near Portsmouth, in 1941.

'Look at them,' said Waugh with quiet venom. 'In those sloppy, shit-coloured clothes they look like convicts in some vast nationwide open prison. You and I are their warders.'

I was 25, three years down from Balliol. My basic rank was Second Lieutenant. I had had six months' commissioned service in the Royal Marines, three of them as an acting Captain commanding the machine-gun company in the 12th Battalion.

Khaki battle-dress suited few, and especially not small, rounded men such as Waugh. When drilling the battalion some moments earlier he had resembled nothing so much as a fretful and articulate pear.

‘You may not like their looks,’ I said, ‘but they're all we've got.’

This reply made no impression on Waugh. Gazing at me with distaste he asked: ‘Have you ever considered what there is to show in modern England for sixty years of universal public education? I will tell you. Obscene graffiti on the walls of public urinals are now written eighteen inches lower than they used to be.’

During our weeks together on Hayling Island I earned myself a baleful glance from Waugh for asking him (disingenuously, since I already knew the answer) whether he had been at Eton. I knew that in fact he had spent his adolescence not at Eton or Stonyhurst but at Lancing, the High Anglican minor public school in Sussex. Afterwards when he went to Oxford it was not to Christ Church, Magdalen or Trinity, which were and are the haunts of the rich, but to Hertford, an ‘ugly, subdued little college’ (Waugh's own description), tucked away off the social map somewhere near the Radcliffe Camera. His rapid ascent into sought-after and expensive undergraduate company is the more remarkable.

Waugh began his lifelong love-affair with the English upper class by discovering at Oxford that its members lived ampler and much more amusing lives than he did. He admired them, he enjoyed their company and he devoted part of his considerable talents to becoming one of them.

This early self of Waugh's was sensitive, impressionable and possessed of a sharp eye and retentive ear for the idiosyncrasies of human speech and behaviour; and he had irrepressibly high and mischievous spirits (with cool savagery behind the smile). After the dreary years at Lancing (‘Anyone who has been to an English public school will always feel comparatively at home in prison’) (2) Waugh's response to Oxford was that of a powerful spring which is suddenly released.

The middle-class virtues and values that had so thrived under Queen Victoria continued to hold general sway in England in the 1920s and ’30s; but their erosion had begun. Among the literate — and especially the literate young — the authority of conventional ideas had been severely blunted by the mismanagement and senseless carnage of World War I. Like other young men and women of his time Waugh reacted vigorously against them.

He plunged into a studied hedonism, rendered appealing — and in the right context — respectable and indeed conformist by the fact that it was, and long had been, the private life-style of much of the English upper class. The relaxed amorality of this class in matters of sex, and its cheerful acceptance of the importance of money, were attitudes which Waugh eagerly made his own.

He was helped to live and hold his own among rich people by the financial success of his first two novels, *Decline and Fall* (1928) and *Vile Bodies* (1930). They were books, which — like those of Thackeray and Trollope — were bought early by middle-class people who seized eagerly on the chance to read about the foibles and follies of their social betters.

He did not (then or later) turn and rend the upper-middle class from which he had come — his father's Hampstead world of publishing and men of letters. Instead, by a conscious effort of will, he set about detaching himself from it and disguising himself as the offspring of an old aristocratic family. To pass muster among those into whose ranks he had chosen to promote himself, Waugh had to find the right social coin in which to pay for his acceptance. During the 1930s, as a form of protective coloration, and as a role in which to utter outrageous but hilariously funny remarks, Waugh gradually assumed the reactionary clubman's *persona* that, over the years, was to become such an integral part of him. It was a subtly observed caricature that finally became no longer a caricature, but a portrait: a bondage to habits and attitudes not truly his own that, in the end, brought about an overwhelming ennui and disenchantment with life. Was it this which helped to kill him at 63? As J.B. Priestley wrote of him with some prescience: ‘The central self he is trying to deny, that self which grew up amongst books and authors and not among partridges and hunters . . . will crack if it is walled up again with a false style of life.’(3)

Waugh was unequivocally a snob: but he was much else besides. In the emotional distress and confusion caused by the collapse of his brief first marriage in 1930, he had his unfolding talent as a writer to console him; and for some years he also sought distraction in travel. But Waugh — despite his iconoclasm — was a naturally worshipful man. He needed some more lasting prop, some purchase in the world outside and beyond himself, some framework on which he could hang his loyalties and beliefs, and some unifying theme that would give his inner life point and structure. In Roman Catholicism he seemed to have found what he wanted: a minority cult (in England) with arcane rites and lofty dogma, and unlimited pretensions. To become a Catholic was a gesture of self-separation from the Modern Age, from the mass of his compatriots, and from his own past.

Unfortunately for Waugh, the years were to prove that he was too flawed and unhappy a man to find the peace of mind and inner harmony that some reach through religion. To the end of his life he was always a devout Catholic, as he was always a faithful husband to his second wife, Laura; but the devil within him was at best curbed — never exorcised — by either marriage or Christianity. When his friend and biographer, Christopher Sykes, once remonstrated with him over his social cruelty, his gratuitous bullying of people who had done him no harm, Waugh answered: ‘You have no idea how much nastier I would be if I were not a Catholic. Without supernatural aid I would hardly be a human being.’ (4)

When Waugh arrived on Hayling Island in 1941 I thought of him primarily as a satirist (though in *A Handful of Dust*, published in 1934, he had shown himself capable of

writing tragedy). Like many of my generation I had been dazzled and entranced by Waugh's gift for pure and liberating humour, with its strong satiric undertone. In that age of leaden English leadership his caustic and dismissive portrayals of various representative upper-class figures — Prime Ministers, diplomats, newspaper proprietors — had expressed my own youthful scorn for the 1930s Establishment in Britain and its spokesmen, the men of Munich. And I was entranced by his vivid, but also lean and lapidary style. The years which I had spent at Bradfield and Balliol learning to write Latin and Greek prose and verse (while not in other respects the best preparation for the 20th century) had at least trained me to enjoy Waugh's precisely controlled technique of writing. He seemed to me to write English with the care and delicacy of a rider collecting his horse before they jump a fence.

What I had not realised about Waugh was that he was so single-mindedly — indeed obsessively — bent on asserting his own membership of the very society he pilloried. Admittedly in Waugh's mind the English upper class was absurd and unmeritable, but the other English classes were just as unmeritable and even more absurd.

My 25-year-old self was also unprepared to find that so engaging a writer could sometimes be so flawed and disagreeable a man — and one, moreover, who seemed positively to enjoy his own shortcomings. By hindsight it appears to me that already for years past Waugh had been adding layer after layer to his protective carapace. By 1941 it was already thick and chitinous. As he wrote later of his own alter ego, Gilbert Pinfold,

> *'he wished no one ill… except when, rather often, personal annoyance intruded. Shocked by a bad bottle of wine, an impertinent stranger, or a fault in syntax, his mind like a cinema camera trucked furiously forward to confront the offending object close up with glaring lens, with the eyes of a drill sergeant inspecting an awkward squad, bulging with wrath that was half-facetious, and with half-simulated incredulity; like a drill sergeant he was absurd to many, but to some rather formidable . . . It was his modesty that needed protection, and for this purpose, though without design, he gradually assumed this character of burlesque. He was neither a scholar nor a regular soldier; the part for which he cast himself was a combination of eccentric don and testy colonel and he acted it strenuously . . . until it came to dominate his whole outward personality. When he ceased to be alone, when he swung into his club, or stumped up the nursery stairs, he left half of him behind and the other half swelled to fill its place. He offered the world a front of pomposity, mitigated by indiscretion, that was as hard, bright and antiquated as a cuirass.'*(2)

Personal annoyance intruded rather often in our Officers' Mess. Waugh was not happy among so many middle-class and lower-middle-class temporary officers (and conscripts at that) who were half a generation younger than he was, and did not share his views or habits. Apart from their other military shortcomings, he felt that they were not sufficiently interested in maintaining Royal Marine traditions off duty. Too many of them lived out with their young wives or preferred to eat out in the evenings at one or other of the local hotels, or to frequent the cinemas and dance-halls in Portsmouth, to the detriment of any proper Mess spirit. They for their part were put off by what they considered Waugh's disproportionate petulance over trifles; and they thought him

standoffish for drinking a half-bottle of claret by himself in the evenings after dinner, whilst reading a book by the anteroom fire.

By that stage of the war all officer candidates in the Royal Marines had to come up through the ranks, or in other words to start their careers in the Corps as ordinary Marines. (This was part of the deliberate levelling process that distinguished the Second World War in Britain from the First and, incidentally, prepared the nation for the Labour Government's postwar establishment of the welfare state. In August 1940 I had joined the Royal Navy (where by then the same rule applied). I had learned to respond to such appellations as ‘Ordinary Telegraphist James’, ‘Ordinary Seaman James’, and finally ‘Probationary Writer James’. After transferring from the Navy to the Royal Marines in February 1941, I found it refreshing to hear myself addressed as ‘Marine Cairns-James’. (Given the vast anonymous muddle of wartime, I had adopted this hyphenated version of my father's name in a conscious attempt to preserve some semblance of a separate identity.) Though addressed (and paid) as Marines, we of the 1941 intake were in fact embryo officers from the first; but for us there was no question of automatic commissioning.

Our predecessors — including Evelyn Waugh — of late 1939 and early 1940 had entered the Corps as officers and were then trained with some deliberation in the sedate and hallowed atmosphere of the Royal Marine barracks at Eastney, near Portsmouth, where it was believed that — as with batches of young Royal Marine officers in peacetime — ‘the discipline of the square, the traditions of the mess would work their magic, and the *esprit de corps* would fall like blessed unction from above.’ (3) The problem for Waugh and others in the early months of the war was to find military employment, for in 1939 the authorities did nothing to encourage volunteering, unlike 1914 when there had been a great and wasteful rush of men to the colours. Official policy was that British manpower, and in due course woman-power too, would this time be summoned to serve in an orderly manner, as each age-group's turn came up, and at a pace with which the armed forces could cope.

Waugh's gratitude at having been given, as he thought, a worthwhile and challenging task among professional soldiers, and one to which he was as suited as anyone else, predisposed him to admire and relish the simple and uncompromising rules and requirements of life in barracks as a Royal Marine officer under training, however temporary. In this unfashionable regiment, the solemn rituals and comforts of the Officer's Mess had evolved among successive generations of poor men who, for two centuries, had made it their home. Waugh felt that he had joined a good new club, even if some of the middle-class turns of speech (‘Cheerioh!’, ‘Here's how’, ‘Meet madam and the brat’) employed by his regular colleagues, with their huge moustaches, would have raised eyebrows at his old one. For them Waugh reserved a tolerant affection which he withheld from his fellow temporaries. Years afterwards Waugh described his first weeks in the Corps in affectionate detail in *Men at Arms*, the first volume of his military trilogy, which is closely based on his own wartime experience. In it the Royal Marines became the Royal Corps of Halberdiers, and the part of Waugh himself is played by the improbably passive and disaster-prone Guy Crouchback.

Our later cohort of would-be Royal Marine officers — and all subsequent ones during the Second World War — were hastily instructed for 14 weeks in the rudiments of officer-like knowledge and demeanour at an especially established Officer Cadet Training Unit at Thurlestone, in Devonshire, according to a streamlined curriculum that allowed no time for the absorption by slow osmosis of the niceties of conduct and ritual in a quasi-peacetime Officers' Mess, such as Eastney had been in the first year of the war.

During my four years at Bradfield I had risen to the bizarre height of Regimental Quartermaster Sergeant in the school branch of the (since defunct) Officers' Training Corps. Life there from 1929 to 1933 was strenuous, spartan and based on a system of misapplied monasticism, like a sports-oriented seminary. Cold baths at 6.45 a.m. and games — or four-mile runs — every afternoon were compulsory. So were House prayers twice a day and Chapel for the whole school twice on Sundays. The more-than-military discipline of the place was administered by the senior boys as agents of the masters, with beatings as the usual sanction for minor crimes (and expulsion for really major ones).

Training as a Royal Marine officer in the Second World War was as nothing to the rigours of Bradfield, so at Thurlestone I had no difficulty in passing out top of my batch and in qualifying for early (acting) promotion to Captain and, in due course, Major. As the latter, I was made commander of the Machine Gun company in the hastily raised (and as Waugh perceived, justly doomed) 12th Royal Marine Battalion. There was plenty of raw military talent and enthusiasm about us, but in our case the dilution of professional leadership had been allowed to go beyond the prudent limit. Too many of us — Officers, NCOs and Marines — were rank amateurs, and it showed. In 1942 a new Commanding Officer tried hard to lick us into shape, with some help from myself as his Second-in-Command (my cherished Machine Gun Company had by then been transferred bodily to the Royal Marine Division, and there broken up). But the Battalion itself disappeared soon after, and like a good many temporary officers with a university education I was transferred to a staff appointment.

Henceforward I was to work directly for the Major-General who commanded our formation, and no longer as an officer in charge of troops. This change led first to service in Egypt and Sicily, and afterwards (in 1944/45) to a glittering, though short and insubstantial period of eminence as a Lieutenant-Colonel at the age of 28. Since I had started my war in 1940 as a humble Ordinary Telegraphist in the Royal Navy — so graded since, at the Recruiting Office, it was believed that as a university graduate I should be able to master the Morse code — I have always since thought well of the Marines.

Because of the Corps' tenfold wartime expansion, officer material eventually had to be sought by dipping more deeply into our class-stratified English society than had ever been contemplated in peacetime. When Waugh joined the Corps in December 1939, this process had still to get under way, and the recruitment of temporary officers had to be slow and sparse at first for want of the slots into which to put them. Hence the officers

with whom he lived while under training at Eastney were still mostly regulars. They were neither wealthy nor titled, but at least they were upper-middle class and thus, by Waugh's standard, ‘gentlemen’. Now, on Hayling Island, in 1941 he found himself almost entirely surrounded by young officers who had not been to preparatory schools, nor to Lancing (Waugh's old school) nor Bradfield, nor to Oxford, Cambridge or any other university. In Waugh's eyes most of them were manifestly not gentlemen at all. As companions they were not to his taste, a sentiment which he took no pains at all to conceal.

More seriously, it soon became clear that Waugh's instinctive distaste for the lower classes and his inability (as his friend and biographer Christopher Sykes describes it) to establish any sort of human relationship with his men (4) not only prevented Waugh from being an asset to the battalion but made him a positive liability. His presence among us (new, as 90 per cent of us were, to any sort of soldiering) could only be disruptive and damaging. There were problems enough to content with already in our efforts to raise ourselves by our own bootstraps to a tolerable level of military competence, without injecting Waugh's particular brand of inflamed and insulting class-consciousness. At a time when ordinary British men and women (as our country's postwar history was to show) had become less biddable and more resistant to traditional authority than ever before, the very last thing that we as officers needed to have around was the stony snobbishness which Waugh exuded. He did not seem capable of addressing a squad of men without putting their backs up.

This was odd, considering Waugh's undoubted positive qualities; his courage, independence, strong personality and flair for acting, all useful attributes in a military officer. It was as if he had no heart, and did not care in the least what the men thought or felt, or what happened to them.

Given Waugh's beliefs it was appropriate that, in September 1939, he should seek as soon as possible to get into uniform and onto active service. His principles both as an Englishman and as a Roman Catholic pointed firmly in the same direction. The Nazi-Soviet Pact had made everything splendidly clear. As he put it himself in *Men at Arms*: ‘The enemy was at last 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.’(5) Moreover (and this too must have been a potent factor), to join up as soon as possible was the done thing in what had by then become Waugh's preferred circle. To wait to be called up would not have been the upper-class thing to do.

But his enthusiasm seems to have been remarkably short-lived. In his wartime trilogy he makes Guy Crouchback's disillusionment begin to set in almost as soon as her leaves the barracks, and it grows steadily through the fiasco of the abortive expedition to Dakar in 1940 and the collapse of British arms in Crete. It grows until — for Crouchback as a Roman Catholic — the entry of godless Russia into the war, on the side of Britain, undermines the whole moral basis of British participation. But Crouchback was Waugh's creation, not Waugh himself. What happened to Waugh, as distinct from Crouchback (though the trilogy, autobiographical as it is, contains no hint of this), is that as the war

went on it became steadily more and more clear to Waugh that he himself was fundamentally unsuited to soldiering.

In the Special Services Brigade, to which he was posted early in 1942, Waugh's inability to get on with his men became ever more pronounced. In the words of a fellow officer, ‘he never hesitated to take advantage of the fact that while he was a highly educated man most of them were barely literate. He bullied them in a way they were unused to. He bewildered them, purposely. I found it embarrassing.’(6) His Brigadier declined to promote him, and explained to Waugh that he had become so unpopular as to be unemployable.

When the Brigade left England in 1943 in order to take part in the invasion of Sicily, Waugh was left behind to kick his heels in a series of non-jobs. His frustrations and misadventures during the rest of 1943 and 1944 culminated in his applying for, and being given, several months' special leave of absence in order to write a novel, which he duly did at a hotel in Devon. (It was *Brideshead Revisited*.) His war ended with a posting to Yugoslavia for purposes of liaison with the Communist partisans, together with Mr Churchill's son Randolph, of whom Waugh wrote in his diary: ‘[Randolph Churchill] is not a good companion for a long period, but the conclusion is always the same — that no one else would have chosen me, nor would anyone else have accepted him. We are both at the end of our tether as far as war work is concerned and must make what we can of it.’(7)

Waugh's failure as an officer left him embittered. As Christopher Sykes says, ‘he saw himself as the victim of a plot. It never seemed to occur to him . . . that his own temperament, his difficulty in establishing tolerable relations with his colleagues and subordinates, his delight in causing offence, his childish and ostentatious indiscipline had anything to do with it at all.’(8) But the business of an officer is to lead others; and this cannot be done by men who dislike and despise almost all their fellow human beings and are wholly unprepared to change their habits for the common good. Waugh had put on an officer's uniform, and was prepared in some outward ways to do what was expected of him. But to adapt himself more radically was out of the question. (He was once taken on trial as an *aide-de-camp* by a General Thomas. On his first evening in the General's Mess he got slightly but unmistakably drunk. Next morning the General reproved him. Waugh retorted: ‘My dear General, you really cannot expect me to change the habits of a lifetime for a whim of your own.’)

Successful ‘man-management’, as it was then called, required some degree of self-adaptation from all of us, whether easy of painful. It was dinned into us that we must at all times put the men's comfort and welfare before our own; that we must get to know them individually and be ready to give any needed help with the personal problems which were inevitable among husbands, fathers and sons who had been forcibly uprooted from civilian life; that we must treat them with the trust and respect due to them as compatriots and fellow-citizens; and that we must never on any account flaunt any social or financial advantages that we might be lucky enough to enjoy over them. To some, all this came naturally; others of us had to learn it.

Ironically, given Waugh's resolute self-promotion as an aristocrat *manqué*, it was the genuine article — the sons of the British landed gentry — who in both World Wars probably stood the best chance of building up an easy, unforced and mutually trusting and respectful relationship with their men. But for Waugh to reshape his accustomed behaviour along these lines was something he was simply not prepared to do. So tenacious was the hold of habit that he preferred to sulk out the remaining wartime years in military unemployability rather than adapt himself to what his country required of him.

Waugh was not honest with himself about this, excusing himself in his diaries by claiming that he had always been miscast as a military officer:

> *'I have got so bored with everything military that I can no longer remember the simplest details. I dislike the Army. I want to get to work again. I do not want any more experiences in life. I have quite enough bottled and carefully laid in the cellar, some still ripening, most ready for drinking, a little beginning to lose its body. I wrote to Frank [Pakenham] very early in the War to say that its chief use would be to cure artists of the illusion that they were men of action. It has worked its cure with me… I don't want to be of service to anyone or anything. I simply want to do my work as an artist.'*(9)

That he was an artist is certainly part of the truth about him, and the most important part. He was a born and brilliant writer whose rare and potent talent it was to carry back to his study raw material from one or other foray into real life and there transmute it into something more orderly and more elegant than reality. His military trilogy is by any standards a great book. It was an extraordinary feat to have made so much out of such a meagre and commonplace set of wartime experiences; and a great pity that Waugh's personal shortcomings should have denied him the chance to participate in more significant ones.

For many, perhaps most of my generation the Second World War II was a rite of passage. It found us shallow. It left us changed and deepened. Waugh was 36 in 1939, and perhaps too old and too set in his ways to change. The truth was that in Waugh the writer dwarfed the man; and in the war the man's failure was the writer's success. The half of himself that he left behind when he ceased to be alone came to abundant life in his books. His outer self was a carefully sculpted comic — but also gross and frightening — mask whose success in shocking and wounding others became the food of something diabolical in his nature, which never took him over completely but reared its horrid head from time to time. He will long be remembered for his work. His failings were the price that his contemporaries paid, willy-nilly, for so much excellence.

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Waugh's diary honourably exempts me from his general dislike and disapproval of the 12th Battalion. I had been at a public school and later at Oxford. Alone among his new comrades-in-arms I knew that he was a distinguished author and had read his books. We went for walks together; I sat with him sometimes while he dealt with his literary

correspondence (he would ruthlessly throw into the waste-paper basket letters from would-be PhDs in other countries seeking help with their dissertations); and when his wife Laura visited him from the West Country he would invite me to luncheon to meet her. Only once did I feel the hot breath of his disdain; it was when we had travelled up together by train from Hayling Island to Waterloo Station, in London, where I suggested to him that we should share a taxi. I still remember the *hauteur* with which he refused; gentlemen (he considered) do not share taxis, even in wartime. But I enjoyed his company, and knew that I should miss him when he departed, even though it was for the good of the battalion that he did and no general tears were shed at his going.

Recently I looked at my wartime letters to my mother, which she kept as mothers do, in order to see what there is in them about my time with Waugh. I found this reference to his departure: 'Waugh has left us. He went in the mood of an earth-bound and miserable spirit that is suddenly granted its release; and wrote to me to send his deepest sympathy in my future trials with the 12th Battalion.' I think this was a perceptive and compassionate comment by my 25-year-old self. I stand by it still.

NOTES

1. *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Michael Davie (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), p. 516. (In this sentence, he is referring to Morrice. CJ.)
2. *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (Boston, Little Brown, 1957), pp.12–13.
3. *Sword of Honour* (London, Chapman & Hall, 1965), p. 50.
4. *Evelyn Waugh, A Biography*, by Christopher Sykes (London, Collins, 1975), p. 211.
5. *Sword of Honour*, p. 15.
6. Sykes, op. cit., p. 228.
7. *Diaries*, p. 587.
8. *Sykes*, op. cit., p. 230.
9. *Diaries*, p. 548.